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Vol. XXIV No. 11 **NOVEMBER 1963**

Eli Rides Again	**E. L. Malpass**	**4**
	Illustration by Hickey	
Challenge	**Brian Cleeve**	**14**
	Illustration by Oliphant	
Case in Code		**28**
The Gemini Racket	**Stewart Farrar**	**29**
Lighthouse Talk	*Decoration by Swavek*	**38**
The Comeback	**Elizabeth Lemarchand**	**40**
	Illustration by John Bury	
Dancing is Life	**Alberto Moravia**	**50**
	Illustration by Hannah Mekler	
Bright Phoenix	**Ray Bradbury**	**57**
When Leaves Depart	*Decorations by Biro*	**64**
A Visit to the Dentist	**William Sansom**	**67**
Witchery	**Hazel Ward**	**79**
Lady's Maid	**Garson Kanin**	**85**
The Beginning and the Ending Tree	**Darrell Bates**	**102**
	Illustration by Mary Dinsdale	
Argosy Crossword		**136**

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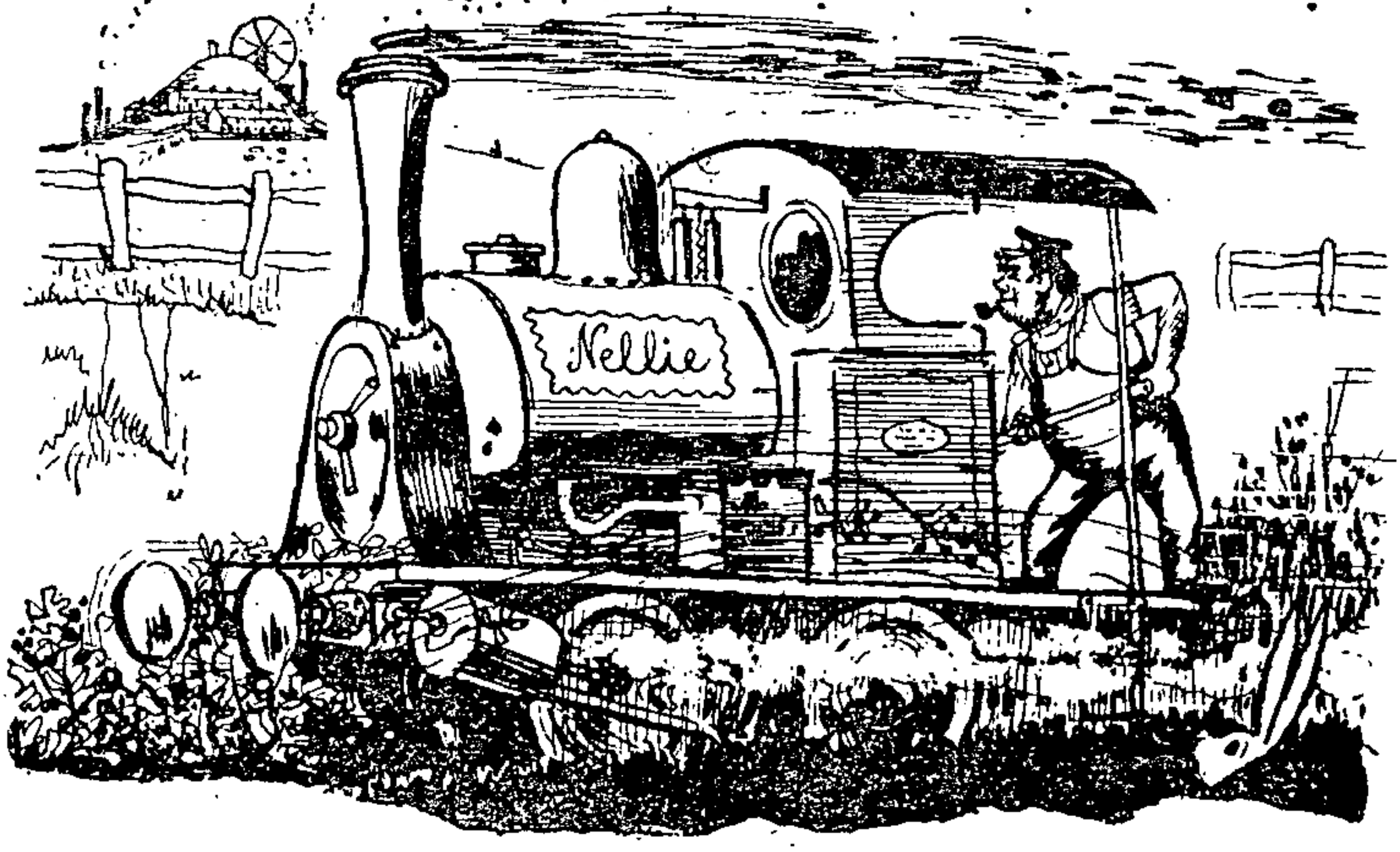

Eli Rides Again

By E. L. MALPASS

CLOSING of Branch Lines: No. 453, Dinas Junction to Llangrwl;" the minute was headed. And in the margin an official had written, "I have a feeling that this one may prove difficult."

By damn he was right . . .

Abraham Shenkyn, stationmaster at Dinas Junction, called Eli the Locomotive into his office. "Got a letter from London," he said with a mixture of pride and misgiving.

Eli put up a hand and groped about in the scrub that covered most of his features. But said nothing. Eli didn't see the point in employing people to write letters. You couldn't run a single train by writing letters, could you now.

"Talking of closing the branch line," said Abraham.

"Closing the branch line?" Startled Eli out of his silence, that did. "But they cannot do that. Opened by Queen Victoria, it was."

"Sounds as though they mean it," said Abraham.

"Playing straight into the hands of Evans the Bus, they would

be, apart from anything else," said Eli. Couldn't stand Evans, see. He banged his great oilcan down on the stationmaster's desk. "Only one place for a missive of that kind. The waste-paper basket."

"That is what I was thinking myself," said Abraham. "But just wanted your confirmation."

A fortnight later the stationmaster received another communication, requesting a reply to the first letter. "Well, there is persistent," he remarked, as the pieces fluttered into the waste-paper basket.

The third communication was a telegram, very tetchy. REPLY IMMEDIATELY OUR COMMUNICATIONS OF APRIL 14 AND 28.

WHAT COMMUNICATIONS? Abraham telegraphed back. And waited.

"There seems," said a very senior official, "to be a certain lack of cooperation on the part of the Welsh."

"You sound like Edward the First, sir," commented his personal assistant amiably.

Looked at him sour, the senior official did. But let it pass. "So I'm sending you down there to sort it out, Marchbanks."

The personal assistant almost dropped the pending tray. "Me, sir?"

"You, Marchbanks." Was there a gleam of satisfaction in the senior official's eye? "You have, I believe, a certain reputation for elegance, charm, and tact. Now is your chance to put them to good use."

"But, sir." A thousand horrified thoughts were already coursing through Marchbanks' mind. Wild, black mountains, curtained with mist and rain. Little dark men padding out of caves. Worse, men in cloth caps slapping him on the back with cries of, "Look you, bach, isn't it." Tight-lipped women in chapel hats. Six day licences.

And what did one wear? Bowler hat and rolled umbrella? Or a Norfolk jacket and deerstalker? He was awakened from this horrible reverie by a bark from his senior. "Well?"

"Sir?" He came to dignified attention.

"You said, 'But, sir.'"

"Did I, sir? I meant—do you think I'm the best chap for dealing with the Welsh? Perhaps—someone with more knowledge of the native mind, if you see what I mean."

"Damnit, Marchbanks, they're not Hottentots."

"No, sir." Unconvinced, Roland Marchbanks sounded. But he knew it was no use arguing. He received his instructions, got kitted out at the Army and Navy Stores, rugged himself into a

first class compartment at Paddington, and settled down to master a little book called, *Welsh Without Tears.*

As always, when the Home Counties were left behind, Roland Marchbanks began to feel that he was on foreign soil. Then England itself was gone and old, primeval things began to close in about the train. The hills became mountains, crowding and jostling ever nearer. Clouds, things you never even noticed in London, became an integral part of the landscape, crawling about the mountainsides, pressing like the palm of a great hand above the valleys. Rain drummed with irritated fingers on the carriage windows.

By the time they reached Dinas Junction, Roland's spirits were as grey and depressed as the little towns through which they had passed. He sighed, tipped his bowler hat well forward over his eyes, grasped his umbrella like a sword. He found a porter. "Take me," he said, "to the stationmaster."

"Got a complaint, is it?" Mog the Luggage inquired hopefully.

"No."

Surprised, Mog was. "Friend of his, maybe?"

"My business with the stationmaster is private and confidential. Take me to him, please."

"Can't do that, good boy. Been at home these two hours, he has, watching telly. Can't disturb his telly-watching, can we now?"

Had enough already, Roland had. Now he drew himself up to his full six feet, ground the ferrule of his umbrella into the platform, and said, "I don't think you understand. I have been sent here by the British Transport Commission to arrange the closing of the Llangrwl branch line. Now bring your master to me."

Marchbanks had seen the stationmaster of a great London terminus quail when he put on this tone. But not Mog. "'Tisn't Mr. Shenkyn you want," he said cheerfully. "'Tis Eli the Locomotive."

"Who?"

"Drives the Llangrwl Locomotive," explained Mog. "And very decided views he—"

Roland cut him short. "I have not come all this way to talk to engine drivers."

"What is wrong with engine drivers? Very important people, they are."

"Rubbish!"

Shocked, Mog looked. "A pretty ineffectual organisation British Railways would be without them." But now he saw a

heavily-built man shambling across the platform. "Eli," he called. "A gent here from London, come to consult you about closing the branch line."

Eli came up. Roland found himself being inspected, and apparently found wanting, by a pair of small bloodshot eyes. Eli said, very formal, "I am not prepared to discuss the matter."

"I haven't come to discuss it," Roland almost shouted. "I have come to give orders to your stationmaster."

"Won't get any change out of Abraham Shenkyn," Eli warned. "The same as mine, his views are."

"Will you understand, once and for all, that his views don't matter any more than yours. The line is to be closed."

"Well, there is arbitrary," said Mog.

"You be quiet," snapped Roland.

"Now, now." Reproving, Eli sounded. "An interested party, Mog is. Gets a lot of tips from the Llangrwl passengers, come the festive season."

Roland remembered suddenly that he was noted for charm and tact. He said, "Of course, this must be a bit hard for you chaps."

"A bit hard! 'Tis my bread and butter," said Eli. "Quite out of the question, it is."

"What you don't seem to realise," Roland said soothingly, "is that there may be more important questions in the world than your bread and butter."

Eli considered. "Can't think of any. Not off hand," he said.

"So that is that," said Mog. "Due in half an hour, the London train is," he added helpfully. "Back to the metropolis, is it?"

"No, it isn't," cried Roland. "I shall see your stationmaster in the morning."

"Won't do any good." Eli shook his head firmly.

"Where can I get accommodation?"

Mog and Eli looked at each other very doubtful. Pursed their lips. "Might try the Youth Hostel," Eli suggested at last. "Have to do a job before leaving, of course, but nothing arduous. Peeling potatoes, maybe, or washing the breakfast pots."

Roland shuddered. "Surely there's a hotel."

"Wouldn't recommend it." Eli scratched himself, very suggestive.

Mog remembered something. "Might try Dilys Meredith Bed and Breakfast, 13 Junction Terrace," he suggested. "Not the Dorchester, mind. But clean and comfortable."

"Thanks," said Roland shortly. He picked up his suitcase and set off. Soon found 13 Junction Terrace.

Well, it certainly wasn't the Dorchester. A smoke-blackened little house in a smoke-blackened terrace. A few sooty-faced daffodils wilting behind the wooden railings of a tiny front garden. Roland would have walked on. But his case was heavy, for he had been kitted out as for India in the monsoon.

So he knocked.

He heard, to his surprise, the brisk clatter of high heels. The door opened, and Roland just stood and stared. Then, remembering himself, he took off his bowler and stammered, "Mrs. Meredith?"

"Miss," corrected the loveliest dark-haired creature Roland had ever seen. She gave him a smile that sparkled like dew on a May morning. "Coming in, is it?"

He stepped inside. "I was told you do bed and breakfast," he said, rather breathless.

"Yes, indeed. Show you your room, I will."

He followed a neat pair of nylons upstairs. The room was small but clean, with a view of Swallow Falls over the fireplace and of the gasworks outside the window. "Be wanting supper, is it?"

"If it's no trouble," he said, still feeling stunned. But there was something on his mind. Surely in Puritan Wales of all places, he would not be made to risk his reputation. "You—er—don't live here alone?" he asked anxiously.

"No, indeed. Grandfather will be in shortly."

Thank goodness for that, he thought. She gave him another brilliant smile, and tripped away downstairs.

Wearily he lowered himself on to the bed, and tried desperately to marshal his thoughts. He had been on Welsh soil for an hour, and already his authority had been not so much undermined as ignored. He had failed even to make contact with the station-master. He had allowed himself to be dragged into futile argument with, of all people, an engine driver and a porter. And now, worst of all, his knees had been turned to water, and his thoughts sent fluttering like released pigeons—by a pretty face and a soft Welsh voice. Well, it just wouldn't do. He hadn't come here to argue, still less to fall in love. He had come to close the Dinas–Llangrwl railway. And, by George, that was what he would do. He set his jaw and went downstairs.

The most exquisite smells reminded him that he had not eaten since breakfast. Five minutes later he was tucking into a juicy slice of gammon, half an inch thick, two fried eggs, and sausage. And, as he ate, he was excitingly aware of the warm, fresh smell of Dilys as she bent near to pour his cup of powerful tea.

Outside, there was the click of a gate. "Grandfather, that

will be," Dilys said. She added hurriedly, " A bit worried, the old gentleman is. Talking of closing his railway, they are."

Eli came in. Dilys ran and kissed him, very affectionate. " Got a bed-and-breakfast, Grandfather," she cried happily.

Eli grunted, put his cleaning rag on the dresser, sat down and took off his boots. Dilys said, " Been telling the gentleman, Grandfather, about them wanting to close your railway." She sat down, elbows on table, facing Roland. " Did you ever hear anything so wicked and callous? Been driving that train for forty years, Grandfather has. And now—don't want you any more, good boy. Go and starve, for all we care." Her dark eyes flashed. " Oh, there is cruel it is."

All flavour had gone out of the gammon. Roland might have been eating cardboard. He said lamely, " One has to look economic facts in the face, Miss Meredith."

She had picked up the teapot. " Replenish your cup, is it?" she asked coldly, looking as though she would just as soon pour it down his neck. " Sound as though you're inclined to agree with *them*," she said angrily.

Charm and tact. Roland forced a watery smile. " What we seem to be forgetting," he said, " is that a branch line is run for the benefit of the passengers. Not of the engine driver."

" Don't see that shutting it down would benefit the passengers very much," Dilys said. Mr. Marchbanks was silent. But he felt trapped. Here he was, alone. And already the enemy had got a new and powerful recruit. What this proud and high-spirited girl would say when she discovered the true nature of his mission he dared not imagine. He leaned over to Eli. " Why didn't you tell me?" he hissed.

" Tell you what?"

" That you live here."

" Didn't ask me, did you," said Eli.

The following day was Friday. As soon as he had finished breakfast Roland hurried down to the station. " Looking for the stationmaster, is it?" inquired Mog.

" Yes."

" Wasting your time. Stricken with influenza, he is," Mog said cheerfully. " Won't be back before Monday, at the earliest."

Roland went back to 13 Junction Terrace. " What is there to do at the weekends here?"

" Might climb a mountain," said Dilys.

Roland had a sudden terrifying mental picture of himself breaking an ankle on the scree. On the other hand, the top of a mountain was lonely and remote. And being somewhere lonely

and remote with a girl like Dilys was worth a bit of effort. "I suppose," he said, "you wouldn't take me up the easy way?"

"Be a pleasure," said Dilys. "And afterwards—go to the cinema, is it?"

"If we come back alive," Roland said . . .

Saturday morning, and the sun coming through the tiny bedroom window, and Dilys, bright and cheerful as the sun, coming through the bedroom door with Roland's early morning tea. "Be ready at ten," she said. "Packing a picnic I am, fit for a king." She looked at him anxiously. "Be leaving your bowler and umbrella behind, is it?"

At ten o'clock they set off, Roland in elegant tweeds, just what the well-dressed man about mountains was wearing, and Dilys in slacks and a red sweater. Up they went, up a tumble of boulders that was the bed of a stream in winter, and a path in summer, and a bit of both at this time of year. Very soon Roland was wet, panting and exhausted. The only possible advantage he could see in this idiot's delight was that every now and then he had to hold Dilys' soft, warm hand to help him up the rougher bits. Then, at last, they were over the worst. They left behind the rocks, and the coarse, tussocky grass, and came to smooth turf, and threw themselves down, panting and laughing. And Dilys, who had given him her hand to pull him over the last rocky outcrop, forgot to take it back again.

The sun still shone, and the mountain towered over them, and the clouds came endlessly from behind the hill like white birds flocking, and below them houses, roads, rivers, and cattle were spread out like the toys of the sons of the morning.

Dilys leaned back on her elbows, a blade of grass held between her white teeth. And asked the question he had been dreading. "What are you doing in Wales, Mr. Marchbanks?"

He said bravely, "I have come to close the Dinas–Llangrwl branch line."

She leaned over him, tickling his face with the blade of grass. "But you won't do it, will you, Roland?"

He looked into her mocking eyes, and felt himself drowning. He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her to him, and kissed her red lips, crushing the rank grass. "You lovely Delilah," he murmured. "You lovely, lovely Delilah."

It was some time before she put a hand on his lips and pushed him gently away. "Omitted to mention, I think, that I have an understanding with Evans the Bus."

He looked at her with concern. "Who on earth is he?"

"Owns the local bus service, very well-to-do."

"And—you mean you're going to marry him?"

"Maybe." She shrugged.

"You don't sound terribly enthusiastic."

"Oh, nothing wrong with Evans. Hates him like poison, Grandfather does, but, well—rivals in business, aren't they. Always been a struggle between Grandfather's railway and Evans' bus service."

He said, "It isn't your Grandfather's railway. And anyway I'm going to close it. Nothing can stop me." Put out, he was.

"You do not know Grandfather," Dilys said confidently . . .

But, however bravely we may fight our human adversaries, there is always that old Fate ready to step in and deliver a four-penny one, isn't there.

And so it was with Eli. When at last Dilys and Roland arrived home, drunk as bees with love and mountain air and the last house of the cinema, they found Eli on a bed of pain, having fallen from his locomotive and done himself an injury, very regrettable—a bed from which he did not rise until long after the branch line had been closed; and Evans, rubbing his hands gleeful, had bought a new fleet of buses; and Roland had returned sorrowfully to London, leaving his heart among the rain-sweet hills of Wales.

Dilys had seen him to the train. Looking down from the open window of his compartment, clinging desperately to her gloved hand, he had seen tears sparkling in her eyes. A great tenderness had swept over him like a wave. And already a whistle was blowing. Urgently he said the thing he had been fighting all this time against saying: "Dilys, darling. Come to London. Marry me."

She had smiled, shaken her head. "Can't do that, bach. Needing me—and the bed-and-breakfasts—more than ever now, Grandfather will be. May be needing Evans' money, too."

The train was moving. "Change your mind," he called. "Come."

She was walking along beside the train, still clasping his hand. "Bring Grandfather, too, is it?" she asked bitterly.

He was silent. Dearly though he loved her, he had known Dilys might not transplant easily. But Grandfather—in Kensington! Imagination boggled.

Dilys was running now. She let go, stopped, stood, very forlorn, at the end of the deserted platform, holding up a hand in miserable farewell. He sat down, pressed his head back against the upholstery, seeking comfort where there was no comfort. Once back in London, he knew, the bright memory of Dilys would soon be covered with the dust of day-to-day existence.

She would become no more than an incident, a gentle, almost pleasurable, ache in the heart. But, until that happened—the ache was damnable.

The rain ceased. The last bars of watery sunlight lay across the English meadows, and the hills of Wales faded and were lost in the sad mists of evening.

But back in London he found that the memory of Dilys did not fade, but tormented him more and more. He wrote to her, every day. But writing did not ease the pains of love. At last he could bear it no longer. He telegraphed to say he would spend the next weekend in Dinas. Dilys wrote back urgently. *Do not come, Roland. And do not write again. Engaged, proper, I am, now, to Evans the Bus. Getting married in the autumn, send you an invite maybe.*

A lonely place, London with its eight millions seemed, when Roland got that letter. Lonelier than the top of that old mountain, where there had been only sunlight, and Dilys in her red jumper.

Eli walked beside the silent track. Already the rails were red with rust, and nettle and ragged robin were thrusting up between the sleepers, and rabbits ran in the deep cuttings. Birds were building in the signals, and a thrush sang from a deserted signal-box. Eli went back to the station. In a siding, he found his locomotive. He patted her cold flank. "There, Nellie bach," he whispered. "Not dead yet, is it." He filled her boiler. He collected sticks and paper. Soon he had a bright, cheerful fire. The pressure needle rose. An hour later he was chuffing, gently and quietly, but with an occasional triumphant whistle, along the path of nettles and red campions that led to Llangrwl, while the rabbits lifted startled ears and scattered at his advance.

At peace, Eli felt. The battle had been fought and, through no fault of his own, lost. Well, he was an old man. Couldn't always be fighting, could you?

He was approaching the level crossing now. He gave a long whistle as he came round the bend, and felt a slight irritation as he realised that the gates would have been closed against him permanently. Well, he could soon get them open again. He came steaming round the bend . . .

The gates were not shut against him. They had been removed altogether. And there, parked close beside the track, were all the new buses that Evans could not get into his garage.

Eli was no longer at peace. Muttering furiously, he put Nellie in reverse. He went back a full mile. Then he started, slowly at first, then faster, faster, rocking and swaying and screaming

round the bend. Hit those buses like a charging rhino, Nellie did.

Oh, what a clatter! Nothing like it since they dropped the bomb on Davies the Dairy, in World War II. Damage and devastation everywhere. And you may say, well, there was a wicked thing to do. But very satisfying, nonetheless.

Livid, Evans was, and round at 13 Junction Terrace demanding his ring back. *And* given it, too. Not one to hum and ha, that Dilys.

Not the only one livid, either. "Thought you closed the Dinas-Llangrwl branch line in May, Marchbanks," said the senior official.

"Yes, sir."

"Then why are we being sued for an accident that occurred in June?"

"An—accident, sir?"

"An accident, Marchbanks. Knowing the line to be closed, a Mr. Evans parked several new buses beside the track. Whereupon a rogue engine fell upon them and demolished the lot." Baleful, the senior official looked. "Not a comforting story, is it, Marchbanks?"

"Did—did you say 'Evans,' sir?"

"I did. Is that your only comment?"

"No, sir. I mean, hadn't I better go down there and investigate?"

Dilys, warned by telegram, was on the platform to meet him. Oh, sweet it was to come home to those white arms. "This time I'm not going back till you agree to come with me," he said.

"What about Grandfather?" Oh, sweet it was to come back to the tenderness of her smile.

Roland said, "Bring him along. There's plenty of demolition work going on in London. Find him a job in no time, I imagine, with his record."

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ENGINE-DRIVER'S EPITAPH

My days of usefulness are o'er;
My wheels deny their noted speed,
No more my guiding hand they need;
My whistle, too, has lost its tone,
Its shrill and thrilling sounds are gone.
No more I feel each urging breath,
My steam is now condensed in death;
Life's railway o'er, each station's passed,
In death I'm stopped, and rest at last.

On a Derby tombstone

Challenge

By BRIAN CLEEVE

ANNA closed the flask slowly, and I saw that her fingers were shaking. She kept her eyes down and wouldn't look at me.

"Well?" Max said. "Are we ready?" He stood on the edge of the rock shelf, looking up at the Needle, the huge emptiness of the sky behind him, a drop of a thousand feet under his heels. Mechanically I ran the coils of the nylon rope through my fingers, checking them. Max would go first, as always. Then Anna. Then me. It would be safe. I looked up at the thin spire of rock, jutting out and up from the mountainside. Three hundred feet. Not much. But tapering. Until at the very top it was no wider than a small table. Just wide enough for three people to stand on, if they clasped one another. Thirteen hundred feet above the valley. I felt my body sweating, although it was already cold. It had been done. Max's father had done it twenty years ago, with two officers on leave. It would be safe.

I glanced at Anna, and I saw that she was stopping herself from looking up, and that her face was white under the tan. And I knew suddenly that if she tried to climb the Needle she would fall. I could see it happening, her hands slipping on ice-worn rock, her body curving out against the sky, the white coil of the rope straightening, tightening; the pendulum swing. And Max not holding; jerked as he was changing hands, slipping, falling outwards, two bodies falling. And an endless second for me to choose; choose to go with them, three of us falling and twisting until at last we hit the mountainside; or choose to slip the knot at my waist and let them go. Because one climber can't hold two who fall from above him . . .

I came out of the moment of vision, and my hands and my face were wet as if I'd bathed them in oil. "Max," I said, swallowing, "don't let's do it today. It's too late." I saw Anna grow very still, her hands on the fastenings of her rucksack. And then slowly, slowly, she looked up at Max. For a second or so he didn't seem to have heard what I said. He was still absorbed by the problem of the Needle, shading his eyes against the fading brightness of the sky. I waited, my throat dry. I couldn't have said it again, whatever the price. Already it seemed like the end

of something to have questioned anything he had decided. He looked down at me at last, puzzled, genuinely puzzled, the arched eyebrows twisting into a half frown, the narrow, hawk face dark with shadow. And I felt sick inside, as if I had been caught out in something agonisingly disgraceful.

"What did you say?" Max asked me, as if he really hadn't heard. And I think that if I had believed that, I might have tried to cover up even then. But I knew that he had heard. And out of the corner of my eye I could see Anna's face; a faint beginning of hope in it that after all she might not have to make that horrifying climb.

"What did you say?" Max repeated softly. He didn't step towards me, or make any hint of a threat. He couldn't have believed there was any need. All our lives, all our childhood, we had followed him. Climbing, swimming, skiing, stealing from the orchards, playing truant, we had always followed him. And been the heart's envy of the other children because we were closest to him. We three. We three. He had been Barbarossa for us, Frederick the Great, Alexander. And we were his two captains. I couldn't have imagined life without him. His voice calling softly under the window at dawn or midnight. Slipping down from the balcony to join him, finding Anna already there, her long blonde hair tucked under her black woollen cap, that tiny hint of fear in her eyes at whatever Max had dreamed up for us to do. But always the excitement greater than the fear. And it was our pride never to question, never to hesitate. Until now.

"Johan," Max said, still very softly, "I'm waiting." The little muscle at the corner of his mouth had grown white and was beginning to tremble. I remembered the first time I had noticed that. The schoolmaster was accusing him of something that in fact, for once, he hadn't done. And Max could have proved quite easily that he hadn't. But he simply denied the accusation and then stood like stone, only that small muscle in his cheek trembling.

"Johan," Max whispered, and it seemed almost as if he was appealing to me, as if he knew already that I was ending something, ending our comradeship, ending our Golden Age. I looked at Anna. Why couldn't she help, tell that she was afraid?

"Why don't we leave it till another day?" I whispered back. "The sun's nearly gone—"

He stared at me, his face slowly draining itself of colour. "I said we were going up. Are you ready, Anna?"

Both of us turned and looked at her. She lowered her eyes. I saw her mouth shape itself to answer, but no sound came. I could almost feel the weight of Max's will press on her, force her,

hypnotise her into answering that she was ready, that she'd climb. And equally I felt something forcing me.

"We're not going," I said. "You're not making her climb."

He swung round on me at that, and I almost flinched away from the cold fury in his eyes and mouth. "You filthy coward!" he said. "So filthy a coward that you have to shelter behind Anna. I tell you we're going up." He pointed a shaking finger down into the valley, where the shadow of afternoon was creeping across the forest towards our village. "My father is down there, waiting, watching us through the telescope, watching for the moment when I do what he did twenty years ago. And you want to stop me with your dirty cowardice."

I hunched my shoulders against his words as if they were a snowstorm in winter, a wolf-wind lashing at me. "Another day," I said. "Without Anna." I was amazed, myself. As if someone else was speaking with my voice.

"Please," Anna said suddenly. "Please, Johan. It's all right. I'll climb." And for a long moment none of us said anything at all.

We stood, the three of us together on the rock shelf, facing one another, and for that moment it seemed that nothing had really changed, that all could be again as it had always been. We would climb, and it would be all right, and we would stand on the topmost point of the Needle and it would be like a crowning gesture, a farewell to school, to childhood, to the past; a salute to manhood, to the university we were going to that autumn, to the future. And then Max smiled. A cold, ice-cold smile, filled with cruelty, and I saw him as if he was a total stranger, a boy I had never seen before.

"Well? Are you still afraid to follow us?" he said, and put out his hand for the rope. And without thinking I swung my arm and sent the thick coil of rope spinning over the edge of the shelf, out into empty space. It would fall five hundred feet maybe before it touched rock. And without it, not even Max would try to make Anna climb the Needle.

I thought he would kill me then and there—send me hurtling after the rope with one blow of his fist. I saw his hands clench, begin to lift. Then he dropped them, and with a face like stone brushed past me and went slowly along the narrow ledge that led to the east slope. Without the rope we would have to take the long way down. Anna stared at me and then at where Max was already turning the corner of the ledge.

"Max," she called, "Max!"

He didn't look back, and after a moment she began to run after him without another glance at me. And I stood on the rock

shelf and felt a chill fall on me. Then I bent down to pick up my rucksack and saw that Anna had left hers behind. I picked it up as well, and carrying both I went along the ledge after them. They were out of sight before I reached the corner.

I left the rucksack with Anna's mother, because Anna hadn't come home yet, and went on to my own house. My father was coming out of his surgery, still in his white coat, cleaning his fingers with a piece of cottonwool. I smelled the disinfectant, and suddenly I wanted to throw myself against him, bury my head against his starched coat, be small again. As I used to when we first came to the village as refugees, and everything was frightening, everything heartbreaking.

"Good climbing?" he asked me, and then he saw my face. "What is the matter, Jan?" We were already in the doorway of the kitchen, and my mother was at the stove, baking. She looked round, her face filled with relief as it always was when I came in. It used to irritate me. Couldn't she realise that the old days were ended, the days when sometimes children didn't come home? And, may God forgive me, it irritated me now.

I closed my fingers on my father's arm. "What should be the matter?" I said, and I went quickly up to my room, flinging down my rucksack, flinging myself on my white bed still in my climbing-boots. It would be all right. Everything would be all right. He'd see. Anna would tell him. I thought of the rope then. But with luck I'd find it tomorrow. Tomorrow. Everything tomorrow.

I must have fallen asleep at that, and I dreamed of the rope. It came alive, like a snake, thin and vicious and endless, creeping down from the rocks where I'd thrown it, creeping into the valley, looking for our house. I woke up to find that I must have cried out, and my mother was in the doorway, short, dumpy, her face startled, her eyes wide with fear.

"Jan, what is it, what was the matter? Little love, little soul, was it a bad dream?" As if I was six again. She spoke in the language of our old home, and that angered me too, made me feel insecure, as if we didn't truly belong here even yet.

"Nothing," I said harshly. "I fell asleep waiting for supper."

"But supper is ready this long time, my darling," she said humbly, and I felt as if I had struck her.

"Mother," I whispered, "I'm sorry, forgive me, it's just that I'm tired—after school—after the examinations." It was a lie, because I never really worked, but it pleased her, and the mere fact that I spoke good German was a sign of my fantastic scholarship in her eyes. She had never learnt to speak it without a heavy Slav accent. Even my father has an accent. She came

close and cradled my head against her apron that smelled of herbs and starch and mountain air, mixed with the scent of her baking. She baked and cooked as if she could build a fortress of cakes and loaves and strudel and pies against the return of war and exile and fear and darkness. If Father and I had eaten one half of what she cooked, we would have died of suffocation. She stroked my head and crooned nonsense words to me, and said she would bring up my supper on a tray. And I lay back and let her because that would please her too.

When it came I ate a little of it, put the tray back outside the door, bolted the door from the inside, and climbed out of the window. Max would be at the inn by now, and we would make it up and everything would be all right. I'd let him shout at me, and tell him I was sorry and explain about how I'd sensed Anna's terror. Everything would be all right. Halfway down to the inn I began to run. I went in smiling, ready to hear Max give his harsh, eagle's scream of laughter, sure in my heart that all was over already. How could it not be? They were all there: Max, Anna, Kurt, Liesl, half a dozen others, all our classmates, sitting at our usual table in the far corner.

"Hullo," I said. "Hi."

And there was no answer at all.

Only Anna looked for a moment as if she was going to speak. Then she too lowered her head, looked down and away from me as if I hadn't spoken at all, didn't exist. I felt as if I had dropped twenty feet and left my stomach behind. Hollow inside and suddenly cold. I went closer to the table, and against my will my whole body felt clumsy, as if I would knock into things.

"I said, 'hullo,'" I stammered.

Max looked at me, hooding his eyes. "We heard a repulsive sound," he said slowly. "We don't want to hear it again."

"But I came to explain," I whispered. "I'm sorry, Max—you—you can't think I was afraid—for myself." But even while I was saying it, I felt the certainty go out of me, out of my words. Was I telling the truth? And then the stammering of my voice itself seemed to give me the lie. Hadn't I been afraid? "I'll go with you tomorrow," I said. "With you and Kurt, with you alone—"

"I don't climb with cowards," Max said. "And after this once I don't speak to them. Nobody speaks to them." He looked round the table, and all of them there smiled at him, except Anna, who kept her eyes down. I knew what it was, well enough. For years they had envied my being friends with Max, wished for something like this to happen.

"Max," I whispered, "have you gone mad—just for one

word—for one time I disagreed with you—after all we—after everything we've done?" I felt my throat choking with the bitterness, the unfairness of it, and was terrified that tears might be showing in my eyes. Max struck his fist softly on the table.

"You dirty, filthy refugee," he said. "We. We. How dare you say, 'we' to me. I took you up, treated you like one of us, you dirty, creeping scum out of nowhere. Get out. Get back to your hovel, and your stinking father—" Before he could finish I struck him in the mouth with my fist, and yet as I did it it was like striking my brother, my father almost, so that the blow was only half a blow. But even so Max fell back against the wall with a crash that sounded terrible under the low ceiling of the room. Anna cried out in fear, and Kurt and two of the other boys started up.

I think it would have been pretty bad for me if Hans Bauer the innkeeper hadn't come out then, his eighteen stone shaking the timbers of the floor, his great voice booming out of his huge stomach.

"Children, children—little dogs fight in the yard, not in the house." He smacked me lightly across the face and put me outside, slamming the door behind me. I waited for a minute, hearing a scramble of feet as they tried to follow me. Let them kill me if they wanted to. But Hans must have held the door against them. He had always been my father's friend, since we first came. I went home slowly, and climbed back into my room. An hour later I heard the tap of a fir cone against the window-frame. When I looked out it was Anna, the moonlight on her face. I dropped down to join her and she looked at me strangely.

"Why did you do it?" she whispered.

I found that I wanted to touch her, to touch her face, her shoulders, as if by touch I could tell her better than by words. Couldn't she know why I had done it? And I found that I couldn't tell her. She had to know. She had to guess. Her eyes were dark in the shadows of the moonlight, and her body was almost shapeless in her anorak and climbing trousers. But I knew its shape. I knew each muscle of her body as she swam. Knew how her waist curved as she came skiing after us down a long slope, how her legs bent to gather strength for the spring in a sudden turn, strong and supple and warm. I had grown up with her as if she was my sister, a part of my life. I could barely remember the time before we came, before I knew her. Only a time of darkness, of moving, moving; the creak of wheels in the darkness, sounds that I knew now had been guns, the feeling of being held in my father's arms. Everything I really knew, Anna had been part of. In the next house to ours,

the next garden. The next bench at school. Anna and Max. The golden Max. The golden Anna. And I knew in that instant, as I had known of her fear on the mountain, that they belonged together. And that I didn't belong at all.

"What does it matter why I did it?" I said harshly. "Anyway, what does it matter what I say? Hasn't Max told you what to think?" I spoke as if it was her fault, all of it. And all the time the doubt lay in my mind like a snake under dead leaves—had I been afraid? Was I sheltering behind Anna? And I knew that it was a lie, that I would climb the Needle now, in the dark, alone, rather than be a coward. "But that isn't enough," the doubt whispered. "What matters is if you were afraid then. There is a moment to be brave, and if you let it go—"

"Hasn't he told you what to think?" I shouted.

She began to cry, and I think that I would have burnt down a house to stop her, to have the courage to put my arms round her. My hands almost moved of themselves, would have moved. "His father was watching," she whispered. "Watching through the telescope for him to climb the Needle. He had neighbours in to watch as well—"

My hands had no desire to move any more. "And that's all that matters to you?" I said bitterly. "That Max's father was disappointed? That Max must wait for another day? I don't know why you bothered to come."

"To warn you," she whispered, still crying. "They are going to beat you. Tomorrow. Shamefully. They want to do it in public. They say you have disgraced the whole village, throwing away climbing equipment because you were so afraid of climbing—"

"It's a lie," I said. "Anna! You know that it's a lie!"

"But you did!" she shouted. "You did, you did throw it away!" And she turned and began to run, blindly, stumbling and blundering in the moonlight, while I stared after her helplessly, trying to think, trying not to think, wanting to die. I heard steps behind me, and it was my father, in his old velvet dressing-gown, that all the nap was worn from, and that he treasured as he treasured nothing else, because it had come with us from our old home. It was almost the only thing my mother rescued when the soldiers fired the house.

"Jan!" he said, and then seeing Anna running, hearing her crying, "Anna, liebling, Anna, what is it?"

"Let's go in, Father," I said heavily, "and I'll tell you." Because by now the thing affected him, too. We sat in his surgery, I don't know why, except that that seemed the place for such a business. The rows of veterinary books covering two

walls, the bench with its retorts and jars and microscopes. I told him it all. When I was finished he said nothing for a little while, but only took off his glasses and polished them over and over again.

"This will seem bad to your mother," he said at last.

I didn't answer, because there wasn't an answer. I knew that he could have said much more. That it seemed bad to him, also. There is always that ember of resentment burning against refugees in any village. It wouldn't take much to fan it. No more than this. Max's father was of the minority that had never wanted to let a refugee family settle in the village. A small minority, but small minorities can make big things happen, sometimes. While Max had been my friend everything had seemed so secure that it didn't matter that his father never invited me to their house, and that one or two of the neighbours said, "Dirty refugee," when they were not quite out of earshot of one of us. That would pass, my father always said. It never stopped them coming to him when a cow was sick or their chickens weren't laying sound eggs. It would pass, he said, and my friendship with Max was the best sign of it. That all old things would be forgotten in a new world, a wonderful new world. A world where everyone would be a human being, not "a native son," or "an alien," or "an exile," or "a refugee."

And now it was as if the hope of that new world lay between us, smashed into silly fragments on the surgery floor.

"And tomorrow?" my father said, not looking at me.

I stared at one of the microscopes. "Maybe it's all rubbish," I said. "They'll do nothing. And if there are black eyes to be given out, I can be generous too." I only wished I felt as confident as I tried to sound.

"Your grandfather was a great fighter," my father said, smiling sadly. "He was known all round. For fifty versts around there was no one to beat him." He patted my shoulder. "God have you in his keeping, son." And as we stood up together, I realised how old he had grown, and how small he was beside me, and I thought with a sudden piercing sorrow how bad it must be for him that he couldn't say to me, "I will come with you tomorrow." And it was as if I grew ten years older in that moment, and understood a thousand things; all that he and my mother had endured; and why they had endured it, why they hadn't simply given up and died of broken hearts and lost hopes. So that I should be able to live as they hadn't been able to live. Secure and rooted in a place that my children and my grandchildren and their grandchildren could in their turn call home. I understood my mother's endless cooking, and cleaning, and

fussing over her two men, and I understood what the words meant to her when she crooned nursery songs to me in the old language and I beat on her knees with my fists and shouted, "Sing in German, Mamma, sing in German."

"Sleep well, Father," I said, and we kissed each other good night as if I was going on a journey in the morning.

It must have been four o'clock before I slept, and after eight when I woke. My mother had let me sleep on, and Father was already out on his morning calls. I lay for a little while in bed, the coffee my mother had brought me steaming beside my pillow. I had no plan at all, and yet I felt almost calm, as if something inside me knew what I had to do. I drank the coffee slowly, and got up and dressed.

"You must eat!" my mother cried out after me as I left the house. "You have eaten no breakfast!" But I only waved to her without turning my head. I couldn't have talked to her then, or said good-bye, or let her see my face. She would have known instantly that something was wrong.

I went on down into the centre of the village, my heart like a stone inside me. The sun glittered on the golden knight above the fountain in the square, and I seemed never to have seen him before. He held a spear in his right hand, and his head was bent. Why, I wondered? Because he was tired after battle, or troubled in mind before it? Or sorrowful that in every battle someone must be defeated?

I sat down on the kerb of the fountain and waited. Kurt saw me first. He came out of his house, sneering, wiping breakfast crumbs from his mouth. "I thought you would have run far away by now, coward," he said. He came up close and spat at my feet, and I felt dizzy, not from fear, but because a boy who had sat in the same schoolroom with me for ten years could spit at my feet.

"I've no quarrel with you, Kurt," I said. "Nor with anyone. Fetch Max here."

"Oh, never fear," he said. "Max will come. We have a lesson to teach you this morning. One you'll never forget. You can take it back home with you. And then you can all clear out—"

I shut my eyes. "Fetch Max," I repeated.

He went away then, I really think because he himself was ashamed to stay there insulting me and was glad of an excuse to leave me.

I stayed where I was, and slowly a dozen others gathered on the other side of the fountain, looking at me and whispering.

Mostly boys, although one or two girls were there. But not Anna. I didn't know if I was glad or sorry for that.

Ten minutes later Max came, striding swiftly, his face dark and savage. And I wondered for a moment if he himself was sorry at what had happened. He stopped in front of me.

"We are going to beat you, alien," he said softly, and I knew then that he wasn't sorry, that his passion to be leader, to be unquestioned, came before friendship, love, everything. That even before I had hit him I had finished everything between us by defying him. And I looked at him with new eyes and wondered how I had followed him for so long. And I looked at the others who had gathered round us, and wondered that they couldn't see it too. But there was nothing in their faces except contempt and hatred for me, not really because they thought I was a coward—there weren't two of them would even have thought of trying the Needle—but because they had convinced themselves that I was a stranger, an outsider. Because it gave them a feeling of warmth, of belonging, to follow Max blindly, to do whatever he said. And what could I say to them for it, when until yesterday I had been the same, worse than any of them, more blindly devoted?

"Well, little swine, are you ready for your beating?" Max said. In a moment he would lift his finger and half a dozen of them would do it.

"Wait," I said, and I hoped my face wasn't white. "I challenge you first," and my voice was almost a shout. "I will climb the Needle without a rope. Will you climb it with me?"

I saw his hand move, but the moment for the crowd to jump blindly at his signal had gone, at least for a while. I turned on them, and for those few seconds I held them, and I knew what Max felt when he held people waiting on his next word, his next ridiculous command. Like being drunk, like walking a foot above the ground. "Why are you here?" I shouted at them. "Because you believe I was afraid to climb. Then watch me climb," and I pointed at Max. "And watch him climb with me. If he dares." Nothing was impossible to me in that moment. Nothing in the world.

"What are you waiting for?" Max screamed. "Beat him, beat him!" And again they were all uncertain, and the power was gone from me and I couldn't do any more. When in the brief silence of uncertainty Anna's voice came. She must have joined us without my seeing.

"We are waiting for you to say if you'll climb, Max," she said. And suddenly it was he who was on trial. I saw him run his tongue very quickly over his lips, because what I had suggested was

quite insane, and Max knew it better than I did, being the better climber. Nobody had ever climbed the Needle without a rope. Nobody had ever tried.

"I—" And then he clenched his fists and spat the words in my face. "All right," he said. "Now."

We went up as we were. He and I were already wearing boots. And the others followed us in a small crowd. We went quickly so that no grown-up should hear what we were planning to do and stop us. Neither of us spoke, and in the crowd behind they kept their voices to whispers, half frightened of the outcome. We followed the east slope, the long way that hardly required climbing and was almost a walk.

When we reached the ledge the others stopped automatically on a level place from which they could watch. Only Max and I went along the ledge to the foot of the climb, and then, not able to hold herself back, Anna followed us. Max and I already had our hands on the rock. I know mine were sweating.

For its first twenty feet the spire was still attached to the mountainside by a little curtain wall of rock, and both of us stood at the foot of that, rather than of the spire proper. Once on top of that "wall" we would both turn left, away from the mountainside, and start up the tapering column of the Needle, handhold to handhold, eleven, twelve, thirteen hundred feet of air beneath us if we fell. I looked at Max's face and he looked away.

"Shall we begin?" I said, and he nodded.

Behind us on the ledge Anna suddenly called out, "No, no, please don't do it; please, Max, Johan."

"Leave us alone," Max said between his teeth. "All right," he said to me. "We'll climb. Now."

I put my hands on the rock. "Let's go," I said, and felt upwards for a hold. For twenty feet it was nothing. Like a wall with bricks kicked out of it. Higher, where the wind worked at the rock face continuously, the holds were worse, smoothed and filed by ice each winter for perhaps a million years. Yet for another fifty feet it still seemed possible. And away to the right, hidden by the huge curve of the spire, I heard Max. The rasp of a boot nail as it slipped on smooth rock, or a curse under his breath. Hearing him, but not seeing him, it was almost like having a team mate, and I didn't even think of fear. Except that all the time I forced myself to look up, and never down. Because already, I guessed, the lean and curve of the spire would have brought me outside the ledge. So that if I looked straight down I would see a thousand feet of emptiness below me.

But I wasn't afraid.

I felt a wind now, away from the shelter of the mountain. Not strong, but like a hand pulling me gently, now pressing me against the rock, now giving me a small sudden tug away from it, away from my hold. It made the sweat on my face and body feel cold. But it was still only a climb. A hundred feet up. And the depth began to draw me, draw my eyes.

A hundred and fifty feet. Halfway. But the peak, the slender needlepoint, seemed farther away than when we began. Look down, the wind whispered in my ear. Look down. I wiped one hand on my shirt, and my shirt was wet. Look down and see if you can still see Anna, see the others. The wind plucking, pushing, tugging, my hands slippery. Look down at your foothold. Just once. Just to be sure.

I set my teeth against the whispering and suddenly something living touched my foot, and I shouted in uncontrollable terror, felt my hand slip, clenched myself against the rock, looked down. Max was a little below me, brought close to me by the taper of the spire. And beyond him, below him, a mile, an infinity below him, the rock platform and the tiny figure that was Anna, staring upwards. And below her—nothing, nothing. I felt my throat and stomach contract, retch with fear. If Max had *touched me again I would have fallen. I made myself look at* him and not at the fall below, wrenching my eyes away from it. And I saw that his face was white, and he was breathing hard and unevenly. Why had he touched my foot?

But I knew that if I stayed where I was, stayed still any longer, I would fall. I turned my head and reached up, felt a slight unevenness of rock and put my weight on it recklessly, barely testing it. But if I fell it would have to be climbing, not clenching my body still and terrified against the rock, afraid to move.

I stopped counting distance then, stopped calculating, even thinking. Only feeling. Up and up, finger by finger, until the roundness of the Needle had grown so small that it was almost like climbing a giant tree trunk. Up, up, until suddenly my hand lapped an edge, my whole forearm rested on a flat surface.

I pulled myself up, heaved, lay with my sweating body on level rock, shut my eyes, felt sick. I had climbed the Needle, and *from far, far down below, from the mountainside*, I heard someone shouting, cheering, and then a whole ragged valley of cheering.

I knelt, stood up, looked at the sky, clenched my hands and made myself look out and down. And nearly fell. The valley like a map: road, river, village, orchards, dark green forest. The wind plucking at my shirt. And under my feet, under the

edge of the tiny platform that was the Needle's point, thirteen hundred feet of air.

I had to kneel down again, and then I thought of Max and went to look. He was still ten feet below the top. I lay on my stomach, and reached down my hand. He looked up at me and the hatred in his face made me take back my hand as if he had burnt it.

"If I get up there I will kill you," he whispered. I stayed on my stomach, looking down at him.

"Then you had better not come up," I said. And he laid his face against the rock. Then he started down again, far faster than he had come up, recklessly, so that my heart came into my mouth, expecting him to fall. When he was halfway I stopped looking and started down myself. And all the way I was haunted by the hatred in his eyes.

For a moment, that one moment after I had reached the top, and was looking across at the valley, I had felt that everything was possible, and that I was at last and truly looking at my home. I had thought for that stupid moment that I had conquered something. That for four years I had endured, and now at last I had conquered. And then I had seen reality in Max's eyes.

I went down fast, not really caring if I fell, came to the ledge at the bottom and stayed there with my face against the rock. After a moment a hand touched my shoulder.

"Why were you so mad?" Anna whispered. I turned and looked at her.

"I don't know," I said. "I thought—I thought—" I looked away from her, over her shoulder, across the neat, green, smiling valley. "I'll go away," I said. "Maybe it will be easier for my parents if I go away."

"Johan," she breathed, "have we all been so evil to you? Max is only one—"

"Max is everyone," I said.

She came very close to me, and put her hands against my chest. "He is not me," she said. "He doesn't speak for me. Not any more." I put my arm round her, because it was something I had for a long time wanted to do.

"If you were my friend," I said, "you'd only bring hatred on yourself. I used to—to—but now I know . . ."

Along the ledge, voices called, "Anna, Anna."

"You'd better go to them," I said.

"No," she breathed. "No."

We went together slowly along the ledge, on to the open mountainside, and in an instant all of them were round me,

shouting, shouting, "Bravo, bravo, bravo for Johan." Kurt first of all, and Liesl, and Karl, and all of them. Hands beating my shoulders. All of them.

Except Max.

"Max!" Kurt yelled. "That much for Max!" And he turned his head to the path where Max must already have vanished, and spat. "He was afraid to finish, afraid of the last metre!" And he turned back to me with a face glowing with love and honour and acclamation. "Johan for our leader, to hell with Max!" And of all the shames I have ever felt, that was the deepest shame.

"He wasn't afraid, you cowards," I shouted at their astonished faces. "Which of you would have climbed?"

And when they simply looked away from my eyes, trying to laugh, trying to pass it off, I could have kicked them, spat in their faces, knocked them down. Anna slid her hand into mine, drew me away, along the path down to the village. After a moment or two the others followed us, laughing, beginning to sing. A long, long way ahead of us, far down below, I saw the hurrying toy-figure that was Max.

"Be glad," Anna whispered to me. "Accept."

I held her hand tight against my ribs, against my heart. Behind us they sang as if there was nothing in the world but singing.

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CASE IN CODE

THE CASE OF THE HORSE DOPER

Tommy Morris was suspected of belonging to a ring of racehorse dopers. So the police intercepted one of his letters. It read:

SWING TABLE AFTER BLACK HEATH ABOVE
ROYAL TOWER WEALD NINTH FIRST KNIFE
MOTIF SPENT EMPTY EVENT OFTEN DOWEL
OPENS PENCE ABOUT SLACK ROOKS LADEN
DOPED MERIT PLANE SLACK RENEW CACTI
FLOUR WHITE INDEX NORTH STILE TRAIN
PUNTS OCTET STING SHOWN CANED PASTE
EXTOL BEAMS

"Not a very difficult code," said Detective Inspector Bassett. "Anyone who can count up to four should be able to solve it. It's just words stretched out in other words."

(*Solution next month*)

D. PENN-BULL

THE GEMINI RACKET

" We've one or two ideas you haven't even thought of," she said wickedly

BY STEWART FARRAR

WHEN you spend eleven months of the year out of England, you don't regard yourself as being really involved in what happens in the twelfth month. Even when you find one of those happenings is turning into a serial. And when it reached that stage, what could I do about it? I'd given Julie—or was it Anna?—my promise. And, let's face it, my annual month in London is a bit of a swan, to top up my batteries and enable my editor to re-establish the rather hypnotic discipline which is his method of keeping control of his foreign correspondents. Also, as he says, to remind me how my fellow-countrymen, our readers, think and talk. (For example, is the word "swan" still understood? You see what I mean.) So it's not surprising if my sense of moral responsibility during that month has a holiday flavour to it. I was only on the sidelines of the whole thing, of course—at least, I thought I was.

Excuses—yes, I know. I should have done something about it. The whole set-up was both illegal and immoral. I'm very ashamed of myself. The knowledge that I'd probably have been more righteous if the twins had been less attractive adds to my shame.

I knew Julie had a twin sister almost as soon as I met her. Most people did; though whether she was identical or not wasn't clear and was only of academic interest because she lived back home in Melbourne; most people knew that, too—in fact, everyone who knew that Julie had a twin. Everyone except me.

And I'd have gone on believing it as well, if I hadn't had dinner that night in Stansted Mountfitchet.

Stansted's a nice little place, but you don't normally dine there unless you live there, or happen to be coming down the A.11 and feel too hungry to make the remaining thirty-odd miles to London unfed—as I felt that night, on the way back from

visiting cousins in Great Wratting in a borrowed car. There was a sort of country-club place just outside, so I pulled in and parked.

As soon as I walked into the dining-room, I spotted Julie, sitting with another girl who had her back to me. You'd spot Julie across a much bigger room than that, in much worse light; she's a blonde slant-eyed smasher with a mobile mouth, a Scandinavian ancestry, and an Australian upbringing. So, of course, I went over.

"Julie!" I called—or perhaps bellowed is the word.

Her reaction was odd. She looked up, startled and confused. If she'd been sitting with a man, I'd have called it guilty—after all, she is married, and Charlie is a friend of mine. But there was more to it than that; a blankness, a lack of recognition that she seemed to be struggling to hide. I stood over her, confused myself.

"Hullo, Dugald," the other girl said. "Have a chair?"

I had a chair, if only because my knees failed me. The other girl was Julie, too. Absolutely and shatteringly identical, to the last eyelash and the last—as far as I could see—stitch of clothing.

Of course, I pulled myself together; the penny did drop. "Well, blow me down," I said, turning back to the first girl. "You must be—Anna, isn't it? I thought you were in Melbourne."

They looked at each other in that quick, joint-decision way twins have.

"She is," Julie said. "Anna, this is Dugald Mackenzie. An old friend of Charlie's and mine. And, Dugald—you've never seen her. *She's in Melbourne—remember?*"

"But—"

"Promise," Julie said.

"*Promise*," Anna said.

I am a sucker for slant eyes and mobile mouths. And when they outnumber you, it's simply unfair.

"All right, I promise," I told Julie. "Now give."

"Let's eat," they said simultaneously. So we did.

"Of all places," Julie remarked over the soup, "we thought we'd be safe here. Blast you, Dugald. Still, now you are here, we're glad to see you. How come, anyway?"

"I'm on my way back to town from Suffolk, and I was hungry."

"Is this on the way from Suffolk?" she asked casually.

"And you a geographer!" I mocked. "B.A. (Hons.), if I remember."

She blushed. "Well, actually, Anna's geography. I'm history. It was only a general degree, you know."

I gaped at her. And then, of course, it all came out.

"It was Daddy's idea, really," Anna said, in the tone of one giving credit where credit is due, rather than passing the buck.

Six years before, Axel Lind had arrived in England, newly widowed, with his eighteen-year-old twin daughters; one of whom, Julie, had a university scholarship. Axel had bought a house in Redland, Julie had begun her studies, and Anna had stayed three months before returning to Melbourne to take a job. All this was a couple of years before I met Julie, but so much I remembered her telling me.

But Anna, it seemed, *hadn't gone back* to Melbourne. She had stayed in that house in Redland—the house to which no one was ever invited, because "Daddy's nice, you know, but a bit of an old bear." And for three years, Julie had attended the history and philosophy lectures, while Anna had attended the geography—and the first-part economics as well. At the end of one and three years, they had sat for their respective subjects.

And nobody but the twins and their father knew that Anna was in England. In due course a general degree of Bachelor of Arts was awarded to Miss Julia Lind. It got her an excellent job through which she met Charlie Bennett. She married him about six months after Axel Lind died.

By the time they'd told me all that, I was finishing my sweet and, I have to confess, choking over it with laughter.

"What a couple of crooks you are!"

Anna asked suddenly, "Didn't you have a beard, two or three years back?"

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"Then I do know you. I thought I did. That time in Cambridge."

I looked at her, feeling my colour rise. "Was that *you*, Anna? And to think I never dared tell Charlie—even if he hadn't proposed to you at that point."

"To *me*, you mean," Julie interrupted. "And you still daren't tell him. You promised—remember?"

When I'd thought that over, I said, "Do you mean to tell me Charlie knows nothing at all about this?"

"Of course he doesn't, bless him. Daddy left us a few thousand, so Anna lives in a cottage at—well, not far from here—but Charlie thinks that she's in Melbourne and that he's never met her. The whole arrangement," Julie added, "is pleasantly relaxing."

I turned to Anna. "Just how well do you in fact know Charlie?"

Anna smiled. " Rather well, actually."

I had to go back to the Middle East two days later, and I didn't see them again till the following year. I thought of them now and then, at first with an uneasy conscience, but later with increasingly rationalised calm. After all, I thought—Charlie is happily married to an attractive, good-tempered, relaxed wife, who presumably gets through the year without losing patience at what I have to admit—though he is a friend of mine—are one or two exasperating traits. If I broke my promise, I'd just wreck things for him—and to what purpose? It was their business, not mine. The university's, too, I suppose, but it would survive; and her employer's—but I knew from friends that Julie (Anna?) more than earned her salary. And a promise is to me, whatever my other moral shortcomings, a promise. Especially when the moral problem is in London and I'm in Beirut . . .

But the following year it wasn't quite so easy.

I couldn't resist looking up Charlie and—his wife—the moment I returned to London. I don't think anyone could have resisted that.

We had a wonderful evening, and to this day I still don't know which wife it was. She knew I didn't, too, and was clearly enjoying the fact. Having no home of my own in London—except that of an elderly aunt of whom I am fond in maximum doses of twelve hours—I returned their hospitality by inviting them, and another couple who'd entertained me, to an evening out in Soho the following Thursday.

But when we gathered in the bar to start off my evening as host, Charlie was absent; he'd been called to Birmingham unexpectedly. Peter and Jean Mansford turned up all right, and I'd brought Susan, my editor's secretary, to complete the party, which was now, of course, unbalanced. Still, it was going to be one of those evenings when nothing can go wrong, because Andrew Fowler was in the bar and obviously at a loose end, so I roped him in to everyone's satisfaction; Andrew is by far the best party-cementer I know. He and Julie—if it was Julie—got on like a house on fire, the Mansfords liked them both, and Sue was her usual hard-bitten, affectionate self.

We had a couple of rounds at the bar, and then took our table at my favourite restaurant, where the lobster was fabulous. Afterwards we went on to a nightclub, where the floor show was equally fabulous, and when it was over we danced till the place shut. I took the opportunity of trying to worm out of Julie-Anna who she actually was, but of course she wouldn't tell me, and frankly I wasn't worried one way or the other. Finally Sue and I drove her to her door, and then I took Sue home.

The whole evening cost me the earth, but I'm only in London once a year and every minute was worth it. I didn't even have a hangover, and just before lunchtime I drifted into the office feeling on top of the world.

The desk told me an Inspector Black was waiting to see me.

I had no premonitions, no guilty conscience; I assumed it must be in connection with one of the little run-of-the-mill jobs the editor hands out when I'm in London to keep me humble and justify my salary. So I went upstairs and introduced myself cheerfully to the Inspector.

"Is there somewhere we can be private, sir?" he asked.

The office has an interviewing-room, so I took him to it, collecting two cups of tea from Maisie's trolley on the way. "What can I do for you, Inspector?"

"You know Mrs. Julia Bennett, I believe?"

The premonitions which I hadn't had caught up with me, fast.

"Yes," I said.

"When did you last see her, sir?"

"We spent yesterday evening together."

"I'd be grateful for details, if you don't mind."

"Certainly," I said, and gave him a precise account of the evening, adding that the six of us ended up at a nightclub, and stayed till it shut.

"About three o'clock, would that be?"

"Half past, actually. Then one of the other girls and I took Mrs. Bennett home in a taxi."

The Inspector tapped his teeth thoughtfully with his pencil. "I see . . . Who were the other members of the party, sir?"

"Peter Mansford—you know, the orchestral conductor—and his wife. Miss Susan Jeffery, the editor's secretary here. And Andrew Fowler . . ."

"Of *The Globe*?"

"That's the one."

Tap, tap, tap.

"What's it all about, Inspector?" I asked.

He sighed. "Mistaken identity, sir—no doubt about it . . . I suppose you were with Mrs. Bennett the whole evening, all of you?"

"Except in the taxi to the nightclub, when Mr. Fowler and I were with her, and just after we arrived, when the three girls went together to powder their noses. What do you mean, mistaken identity?" I was trying to keep my voice normal.

"Either that or very clever impersonation. You know that

exhibition of Italian silver that's on in St. Martin's Lane this week?"

"I didn't, no."

"Well, it's open till ten in the evening. And at a quarter to nine last night, a woman walks in, bold as brass, says, 'Excuse me,' to a bunch of people looking at the most valuable piece in the show—a Renaissance figurine—lifts it off its stand, and walks out with it. Does it so confidently they all think she's official. There was a doddery old attendant in charge at the time, and when he realised what had happened she had vanished. The funny thing is, sir, three separate people in the crowd identified her as Mrs. Julia Bennett. I mean, she's rather a striking lady, isn't she? One of them actually says he greeted her and she replied."

"Good lord," I said weakly.

"Yes, sir. Tell you the truth, when I'd got all the evidence, I thought it was some sort of stupid lark . . . But what you've said fairly floors me. I mean—well, your friend Mr. Mansford, he's sort of a national figure, and Mr. Fowler I've known for years, of course, and—oh, lord."

We exchanged a few more sentences, finished our cooling tea, and he went forlornly away. I managed to keep a poker face till he'd gone, though of course I was boiling mad. Then I grabbed the interview-room phone and rang Julie's flat.

"I'm coming round," I told her as soon as she answered, and slammed the phone down, still furious.

She greeted me brightly at the door of the flat, and let me in at once. She was wearing a pale green housecoat and looking, in the Inspector's inadequate word, striking. "It was a lovely party, darling. Thank you so—"

"Which one are you?" I demanded.

"Which what, Dugald dear?"

"Look, I'm in a filthy temper and liable to—"

"Anna," she said.

"Is that the truth?"

"Honest."

"What a word! Look, Anna, you've got to return that ruddy figurine—*now*. I know I made a promise, but I won't be a sucker."

She smiled at me with that lovely big mouth of theirs. "But, darling—it's returned already. By registered parcel, from the all-night post office in Charing Cross Road."

I sat down limply. "So the Inspector's first idea was right."

"Rather a poppet, wasn't he? What first idea?"

"That it was all a stupid lark."

Anna put her head on one side and answered, "Let's call it an

experiment. But I will admit it was fun. Have some coffee?"

"Yes, please. But I'm warning you—"

"Don't be pompous, darling."

"Sorry. I'm reasoning with you, then. You're running the hell of a risk. If you really did something serious, the police would soon find out you're not in Melbourne. And Charlie . . ." I was trailing her into the kitchen, feeling rather foolish.

"I know, Dugald."

"Well, then."

"But we have one or two ideas you haven't even thought of," she said wickedly.

"I don't wish to know. And I don't promise to keep my promise if—"

"Oh, darling." She put down the coffee pot and slid her arms round my neck. "I'm sure you will."

I was lying when I told her I wouldn't be a sucker. Half an hour later I asked her, "*Which one are you—really?*"

"Can't you tell?" she murmured. "How very unprincipled of you, darling."

I'm sorry to disappoint you, but if they actually did anything criminal after that, I never learnt about it. And I may be a coward, but when I came back to London ten months later I was determined to steer clear of them. But I hadn't been in the office twenty-four hours when Charlie Bennett rang up. After the usual exchange of banter—Charlie is given to clichés and dated heartiness, one of the exasperating traits I spoke of earlier—he asked me suddenly, "Dugald, how would you like to be a godfather?"

"Who—me?"

"Yes—you. And what's more, you can choose your sex."

"Say that again?"

"Julie's had twins, old boy. Three weeks ago. One of each."

"Thank heaven, they're not identical, anyway."

"What's that, old boy?"

"Oh, nothing. Thanks, Charlie, I'd love to. And congratulations."

"Thanks. Which'll you have?"

"I think it had better be the boy."

"Jolly good show. Dugald's his middle name."

Actually he was rather a good-looking baby, and when I saw him, two days before the christening, I told Charlie so. I kept to myself the opinion that he was handsomer than his sister, whose mouth looked too big at that age—but then so had her mother's, I expect.

"What's his birthday? I'd better know."

"If you're going to be a godfather, you better had. It's June the eighth."

"Gemini," I said.

"Yes—isn't it a yell?"

I got out my diary and began to write.

"And little Anna's is June the tenth," he went on.

I held my breath for a moment, then asked carefully, "Rather a gap, that?"

"Well, yes, old boy, so they tell me. Doctors usually hurry up the second one, these days. But this chap's an old friend of the Linds, and Julie says he knew what he was at. And on the evidence," he said proudly, "he must have."

"Did she have a bad time?"

"Easy as pie, she says. Wasn't there myself, matter of fact. For some reason she insisted on going up to Scotland to have them—thought the air would suit her, or something. And this doctor pal being there, of course. But everything went off fine, and she stayed up there a couple of weeks and then brought 'em both home. How about a drink?"

"Thanks, Charlie. I'd like one very much."

He went to fetch glasses, bumping into Julie in the doorway.

"Sorry, Mother!" he boomed fatuously as he disappeared.

Motherhood suited Julie. She had filled out a little, but she looked magnificent, and she came over to me smiling and took both my hands.

"Oh, by the way, Dugald," she said quietly as she kissed my cheek, "a message from Anna."

My throat was dry. "Yes?"

"She's glad you chose the boy."

As well as I can from Beirut, I try to be an attentive godfather.

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SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD
on page 136

Across. 1, *Light industry*. 8, *Balance*. 9, *Scolded*. 11, *Insult*. 13, *Puffball*. 15, *Giddy*. 16, *Wattage*. 18, *Solomon*. 19, *Nabob*. 21, *Electric*. 23, *Oxtail*. 25, *Railing*. 26, *Lunches*. 28, *Thirty seconds*.

Down. 2, *Ill-used*. 3, *Hen*. 4, *Ibex*. 5, *Disgusting*. 6, *Scoff*. 7, *Radiate*. 8, *Bring to bear*. 10, *Dollar bills*. 12, *Loyal*. 14, *Swimmingly*. 17, *Annex*. 18, *Swedish*. 20, *Beached*. 22, *Trier*. 24, *Glee*. 27, *Neo*.

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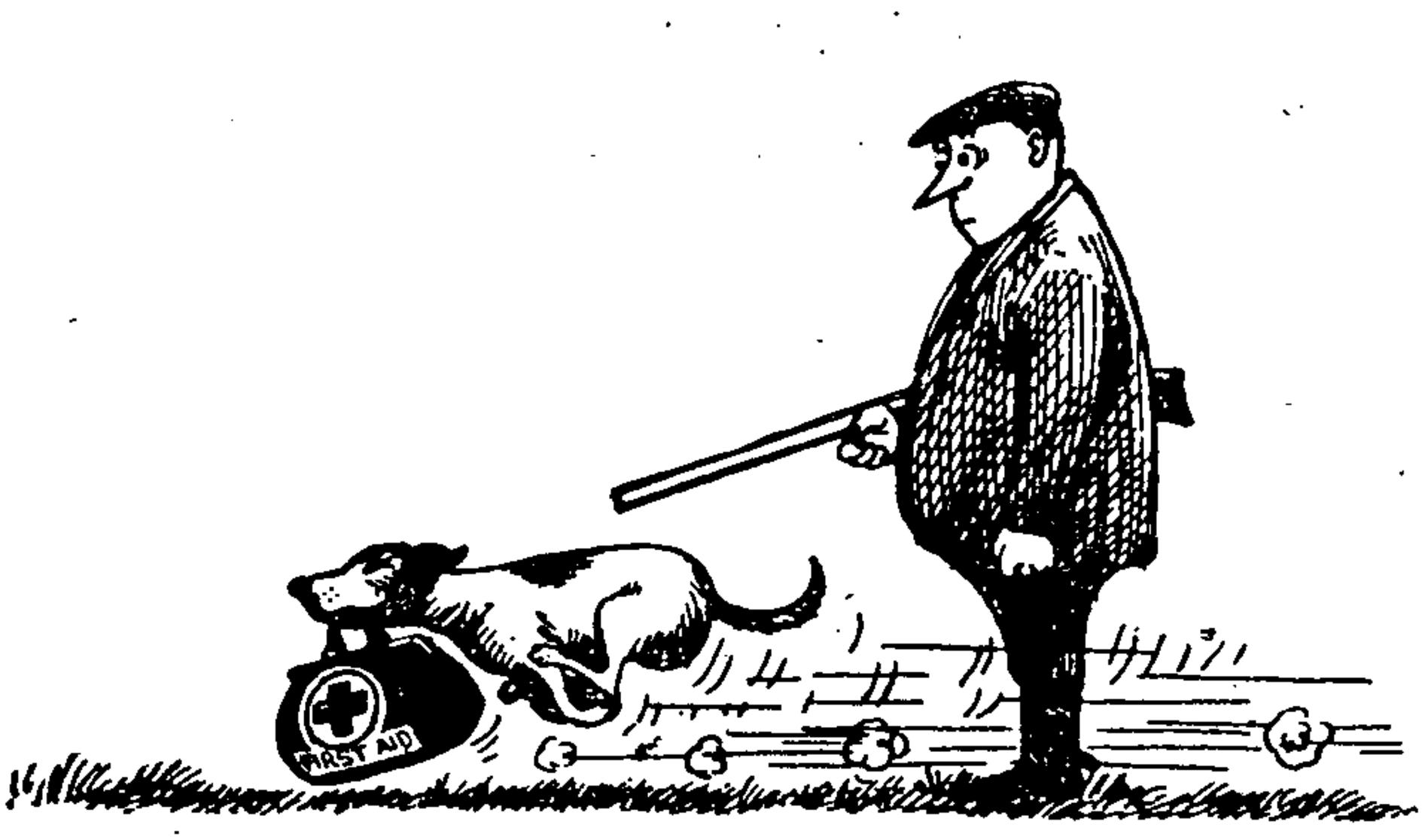

Cartoon by
THELWELL

LIGHTHOUSE TALK

O dream of joy ! is this indeed
The lighthouse top I see ?

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Without a word, the Doctor sped on up the winding steps of the tower. Round and round he went, upward, till he was ready to drop from dizziness.

At length, reaching the great glass lamp chamber at the top, he set down his candle, and, striking two matches at once, he held one in each hand and lit the big wick in two places. And when at last the great light from the big lamp at the top of the tower suddenly flared out over the sea there was the bow of the vessel, not more than a hundred yards from the rocky shore of the cape!

Then came a cry from the look-out, shouted orders from the captain, much blowing of whistles and ringing of bells. And just in time to save herself from a watery grave, the big ship swung her nose out to sea and sailed safely past upon her way.

HUGH LOFTING, *Dr. Dolittle's Post Office*

The Eddystone Light

My father was the keeper of the Eddystone Light
And he slept with a mermaid one fine night
From this union there came three
A polyp and a porpoise and the third was me.

One night as I was a-trimming of the glim
A-singing a verse of the evening hymn
A voice from the darkness shouted " Ahoy! "
And there was me mother, a-sitting on a buoy.

" Oh what has become of my children three? "
My mother then did ask of me.
" One was exhibited as a talking fish,
The other was served up on a chafing-dish."

Then the lightning flashed from her seaweed hair,
I looked again, and me mother wasn't there,
But a voice came echoing out of the night,
" To hell with the keeper of the Eddystone Light! "

Yo ho ho, the wind blows free
Oh for a life on the rolling sea!

Ballad

Fog Signals

Bang. Bang. Two dull reports sounded somewhere not so very far away on the starboard bow. A long-drawn-out hoot, four whole seconds of it, sounded somewhere to southward.

" Lighthouses taking a hand," said Captain Flint. " That's the Longships and the Wolf Rock. I've just been looking them up. Every five minutes we'll be hearing those bangs, and the Wolf does its howl every thirty seconds."

ARTHUR RANSOME, *Peter Duck*

Bonnie Breeze

The night that we parted I stood by the lighthouse
Till darkness came down o'er the bonnie blue sea
Oh, blow the wind southerly, southerly, southerly,
Blow bonnie breeze, my lover to me.

Ballad

Revealing Beam

The lighthouse beam flashed over her laughing face.

" Glasalla seems to have made a point of breeding beautiful women," he said. " I suppose as an answer, a counter-irritant, to this damned lighthouse! Imagine what it would be like, Fanny, to be very plain and live under this mad beam! "

" Lots of plain people live around—we don't notice it, you know. It's just the lighthouse—it can't be helped! "

. . . He took her hand and they walked a few more paces through the still garden. By the iron gate he turned and took her in his arms. He bent and searched her lifted, quiet face.

" Most beautiful," he said. " Oh, Fanny, most beautiful, have mercy! "

" Mercy on us both," she said surprisingly, and kissed him.

The stroke of the lighthouse fell harshly on them, and passed, and fell again.

KATE O'BRIEN, *The Flower of May*

BY

ELIZABETH LEMARCHAND

AFTER thirty years of married life Tom Cobb was still in two minds about his wife's reactions in sweetshops. As she scrutinised the rows of glass bottles on the shelves with a selective eye, he thought for the hundredth time that you'd surely expect she'd know what she liked by now. But the zest with which she finally decided to have a go at some things called Tangerine Treats made him glad he'd married a woman with

another unusual story by Argosy's new discovery

a sense of adventure, and a bit of the unexpected about her.

He stood watching the proprietress of the Comeback weighing out the sweets and telling Nell that they were a new line. Not the sort you usually saw behind a sweetshop counter; more like someone in the post office, or a schoolteacher. A bit smug, somehow. Laughing up her sleeve. Bet she was turning over a pretty penny though, for all that it was such a small place. Two youths pushed their way in as the Cobbs came out.

As they walked along the sea front his wife echoed this idea.

"Proper little goldmine, I'll be bound."

"Bit rum, I thought."

"Whatcher mean, Tom? Bright and clean as a new pin, an' a wunnerful choice."

"Oh, I dunno. Seemed different from most."

He picked out two deckchairs from a stack and carried them over to a vacant space on the beach. Encamped, they settled down to pleasurable inactivity. Mrs. Cobb unwrapped a Tangerine Treat, and popped it into her mouth. Tom opened a newspaper, but his slow, tenacious mind had not finished with the Comeback. At last he got it.

"I know what was rum about that place."

"What?"

"Stuff all under glass like a cooked-meat shop. Packets on the top must've bin dummies. Picked one up, I did. Hadn't got no weight."

"'Tis all this clean food stuff. You sees notices up."

Tom did not answer, his mind having moved on to the name Comeback. A good one for a sweetshop, but some elusive memory was teasing him . . . Name of a kid's game, that's what it was. A ball in a net hung on a post, which came back at you when you hit it.

He closed his eyes. The rhythmic wash of the ebbing tide carried him out of consciousness.

Edith Musgrave shoplifted for the first time on the day after her mother's funeral, entirely without premeditation or purpose. People said that Mr. Reckitt's fiddling about drove them silly, but his shop was handy and saved going down to the town. Edith did not usually shop on a Friday but the laundry manager had given her the day off. She had enjoyed a good lay in, and

now fancied a bacon-and-egg dinner. The larder was pretty well empty after all the upset, so she had to come out. This unaccustomed leisure and a house now wholly her own was something to savour with relish, and she grudged the time lost while little Mr. Reckitt fussed over his bacon slicer, checking and adjusting the mechanism.

Oh, get on with it, she thought irritably, shifting her weight from one foot to another as she watched him. Her left hand held her open purse, while with her right she fingered some small bottles in a bowl on the counter. In mounting impatience she gripped one tightly. She never knew what sudden impulse made her transfer it to the pocket of her coat.

Now, as she finished her meal, the bottle was standing in front of her on the coarse white tablecloth. It was a cheap brand of almond flavouring, quite useless to her, but as she looked at it she was filled with a queer excitement. She had experienced the same feeling when her mother had died after a few hours' illness, and a sudden imaginative vista of escape from the monotony of her life had opened up. But then, the realisation that her mother's Old Age Pension had died with her, and that there was no practicable escape from the laundry office and the dingy little rent-controlled house, had clamped down on it.

Edith sat with elbows on the table, both hands round a cup of strong tea. She was fifty and had let herself go. Her lanky iron-grey hair was home-bobbed and her complexion neglected and shiny. Her expression was blank to a degree which might have suggested a defensive mask to the observant, their diagnosis borne out by her intelligent, if hard, grey eyes.

Her grudge against life was of forty years' standing and had become part of her. The bright little Edith Musgrave of Standard VII in the Elementary School had won a free place to the Grammar School, a week before her father had been knocked down and killed while taking an unauthorised short cut across the railway line. The Company wasn't liable, of course. Mrs. Musgrave had gone out to work, and Edith, the free place refused, had started at the laundry office the day after she could legally leave school. She was still there.

I'll smell it on my deathbed, she thought, summoning up its dry airlessness and the sharp odour of ironed linen and ink.

She had worked her way up from office drudge and learner at ten shillings a week to head clerk with two under her, earning good money for a woman with no qualifications. She'd never get as much anywhere else now. Her place was behind the little opaque window at which customers tapped when they came to pay their bills, or complain about missing articles. "There,

but for the malignancy of fate," she might have said, "go I." Smart wives of successful businessmen came, and assured women who had made their own way. Edith never made mistakes in her books or over change, or responded to friendly overtures. The transaction completed, the window slammed down again, and the client departed, feeling cut short. She knew that she was called the Graven Image by the laundry staff, and even by the manager in his more informal moments.

I've never had a chance, she thought, as she sipped her tea. That old fool Reckitt. I've ten times his brain. I'd make that shop so good folk 'ud come up here from town to it. I'm owed something for all I've missed through no fault of my own. I've fooled him out of ninepence, anyway.

She picked up the little bottle and turned it over in her hand. It was almost as though it possessed some occult power of generating ideas and stimulating action. In a flash, the ease, the enjoyable deception, and the grudge-relieving satisfaction of shoplifting took shape in her mind. She sat very still, considering the element of risk, and finally embraced it. She knew that if she had been granted the opportunity to pit her wits against the world, she would have revelled in taking chances.

Later in the afternoon, unable to settle to anything, she felt the desire to take her suddenly enlarged concept of her future to the open spaces of the park. She strolled about in the autumn sunshine, sitting down from time to time on one of the green benches, and even once engaging in casual conversation with a stranger. She felt as though she were becoming aware of herself as a person for the first time since her childhood . . .

The passing of the years had not caused Edith Musgrave's intelligence to atrophy, and she had learnt self-discipline in a hard school. She realised that brain tells in shoplifting, as in all conscious activities. Mrs. Musgrave had been a hoarder. There was a musty cupboard under the stairs, full of old newspapers. For several weeks Edith devoted her evenings to working through them. She neatly cut out all accounts of shoplifting cases brought to court. Then she read them carefully and classified them. They gave her much food for thought.

"Pinching in the big stores and self-service places with their detectives is a mug's game," she told herself. "Not for me, thank you very much. I'm going for the smaller places, and never before I've had a look at the layout, either."

She stuck to this resolution, however apparently favourable the opportunities in chain stores and similar establishments. The fact that she was wholly uninterested in the goods she pilfered gave her a wide choice of fields in which to operate. She soon

acquired an astonishingly accurate knowledge of many of the smaller local shops, and of the personalities and habits of the men and women behind their counters. She rightly held these to be as relevant to her purpose as the disposition of the stock. Some assistants were chatty with the customers. Others gossiped endlessly among themselves, regarding the would-be purchaser as a tiresome intruder, to be got rid of with as little inconvenience as possible. There was the efficient proprietor with his eye on business at one extreme, and at the other, the dim-witted and uninterested young woman, owing her status solely to the labour shortage. Some shops were for ever pushing "special offers," often displayed with more regard to attracting notice than to the safeguarding of the articles concerned.

Edith carefully noted shops with unexpected entrances from the back, and those whose windows gave a good view of their interiors. An overcrowded window was a protection, over-staffing a potential hazard; the muddle of some old-fashioned shops, money for jam.

She also had to weigh up the pros and cons of establishing an image of herself as a respectable regular customer. This carried the long-term risk of recurrent losses becoming equated with her appearances, but on the other hand a casual purchaser might attract more interest. There was the question of timing, too. Her own working hours restricted serious operations to Saturdays. Saturday was market day with an element of the unpredictable contained within the framework of its shopping pattern: extra counter hands and eccentric customers.

On the Friday evening before she embarked upon her planned programme of shoplifting, Edith prepared a place for her spoils. It was symptomatic that she only visualised them collectively. My bottom drawer, she thought with a touch of grim humour. With sudden distaste she swept a few musty garments from the rickety chest in her mother's bedroom, dusted out the drawers, and re-lined them with clean newspaper. The bottle of almond essence occupied pride of place in the top right-hand drawer.

On the following day there began the build-up that was to go on all through the winter. Edith had never heard of Kim's Game but soon invented it for herself. On Saturday evenings she checked her total and rearranged the contents of the drawers. Each night in bed during the week which followed, she ran over the individual items in her mind. It became progressively more difficult as the number increased, but her naturally good memory proved equal to the challenge. One Saturday in February she reached and overpassed her century.

Another build-up was going on at the same time: that of

her self-esteem. With the growing sense of getting even with a society that had defrauded her, her envy and resentment of others began to lessen. She became more gracious to customers, and friendlier to her subordinates in the office.

" Graven Image's gettin' quite a talker," one remarked, when Edith was out of the room.

" Can't think what's come over 'er," answered the other. " Someone left 'er a fortune? "

" P'raps she's 'ooked a man now 'er mum's gone! "

" I don't think! No man's as 'ard up as that! " They laughed.

Shortly after this conversation took place, the rhythm of Edith's life was interrupted by an unusual incident. As she dressed herself one morning she heard the postman push something through the letterbox. She speculated while making her bed. She had no living relatives to her best belief, and certainly no friends given to letter-writing. It wasn't the time for the rates or the gas bill.

As she went downstairs she looked for a circular on the mat, but she saw instead a goodlooking white envelope bearing a threepenny stamp. For the first time since her shoplifting career began she felt a twinge of apprehension. Was it possible that somebody had seen her? Did the police write letters?

Her mother's name and address were typewritten on the envelope, which was postmarked Newcastle-on-Tyne. Reassured but puzzled, Edith took it into the kitchen, lighted the gas under the kettle, and slit open the letter with a knife. Its contents were short and to the point.

Under the will of her stepbrother, John Henry Heyward, bachelor, deceased, Ellen Jane Musgrave, widow, inherited his estate. Should she have predeceased him, the estate was to pass to her daughter, Edith. Would Ellen Jane Musgrave please take steps to establish her identity? Almost as an afterthought the value of the estate was stated to be approximately four thousand pounds. The letter was signed on behalf of a firm of solicitors.

Edith read it through several times and finally put it down on the table. Moving like an automaton, she made a pot of tea and took butter and bread from the cupboard, her mind groping after memories of her mother telling her that her own mother had had a no-good runaway son by her first husband. Gradually, as she ate and drank, the reality of her changed circumstances was borne in on her. With each moment it became more and more difficult to remember what life had felt like before the letter came. The realisation that fortune had not, after all, passed her by, bred in her a mounting sense of exultation.

It was not until she was hurrying down the street, well after her usual time, that the major preoccupation and driving force of the past six months re-entered her mind, bringing with it a sudden dismay.

At that moment she knew with certainty that Edith Musgrave, woman of independent means, was incompatible with Edith Musgrave, avenger of her wrongs on a society that had held nothing for her. The excitement and satisfaction of outwitting its members and the sense of achievement in each neat little coup had got to end. She felt cheated after all, as if life had given with one hand only to take away with the other, and this feeling persisted, even though commonsense reasserted itself.

All through the past winter, Friday evening—when she finally decided upon her shoplifting programme for the next day—had been one of the most enjoyable times in her week. But on this particular one she sat over her high tea with a blank day in prospect. She had already decided that she must consult a lawyer about the letter. She'd have to ask for time off—think up some reason. Folks like lawyers didn't go to the office on Saturdays, and she wasn't going to be put off with some clerk . . .

Presently, feeling restless, she went upstairs and opened the drawers. She could have written an account of the skilful acquisition of every article in them. Her eye fell on the bottle of almond essence, the initiator of so long a train of events.

Just one more, she thought. Only the once. Something worth having, to finish up. Bit o' jewellery or suchlike for a souvenir of a good time. Best I've had up to now.

She broke all her rules the next day. She had never before attempted to steal from jewellers' shops, classifying them with the big stores as unsuitable terrain for intelligent shoplifters. It meant, therefore, operating without a preliminary reconnaissance. She finally decided upon a fairly modest establishment with a watch and clock repairing business. It was rather dark inside, with a counter littered with cheap costume jewellery and trays of secondhand oddments. About a dozen watches bearing small labels lay in a row, awaiting collection by their owners. More were suspended on hooks in a blue velvet pad hanging on the wall. Edith reacted quickly.

"Tell you the truth," she said apologetically to the elderly rubicund man behind the counter, "I don't properly know if I've come to the right shop or not. Mrs. Lock next door but one to me back in Little Netford asked me to call for her watch, and where she said 'twas has gone clean out of me head!"

He smiled at her pleasantly enough.

"Lock? I don't seem to remember the name, but then, I

mightn't, seeing so many watches come in. Not one of this lot, anyway. When did she bring it in?"

"Matter of six weeks, she said."

"Should be done, then. I'll just run through these."

With his back towards her, as he studied the velvet pad, it was too ridiculously easy. It only remained now to be apologetic, and to listen to his suggestions as to other watch-repairers likely to have been patronised by the mythical Mrs. Lock. She thanked him repetitively, and with no suggestion of haste kept him in conversation as she backed towards the door. On the threshold she almost collided with an incoming customer. A bit of luck that. It would distract the old chap's attention. The next moment she was out in the crowded street.

About ten minutes later, the newcomer looked up from a stand festooned with necklaces, where she was choosing a birthday present for her daughter.

"Lost something, Mr. Wilson?"

He was hunting about on the counter, shifting the trays, and shaking the sheets of soft paper in which purchases were wrapped. "Funny thing," he said. "I know for a fact there were ten repairs here waiting for collection. All promised for this morning. Only nine here now."

Presently she came up to him holding out a necklace.

"I'll take this one, please, Mr. Wilson. Haven't you found the watch? You look worried."

"No, I haven't, Mrs. Mayhew, and you're right, I'm properly worried. I'll take my oath there were ten here quarter of an hour back." He hesitated. "I'm making no accusations mind—you don't happen to know the name of the lady who went out as you came in?"

"Not her name," said Mrs. Mayhew, "but I know where she works—in the Town Laundry office. She used to be as glum and disagreeable as you like, but last time I went to pay the bill we had quite a nice chat."

Edith Musgrave had never had any dealings with the police, but she knew at once that her caller was a plainclothes man.

"Miss Edith Musgrave, miss?" he asked.

"That's my name."

"We're making some inquiries about a watch missing from Hargreaves', the jewellers in Hill Street, and think you may be able to help us."

"You'd better come in." She led the way to the kitchen.

Distance is relative. The few steps along the dark, narrow passage were for her the six months' return journey to the self

who had almost ceased to be aware that she existed. Shattered fragments of her recently gained self-respect marked the route.

"You'd better take it," she said tonelessly, pointing to the watch lying on the dresser . . .

Young Mr. Albright, of the firm of Albright, Risley, and Albright, found his client unhelpful.

"I think our best course will be to emphasise the shock you experienced at the time of your mother's death," he said. "People often do silly things when their nerves are upset. But I think it is only fair to warn you that there's been other trouble of this sort in the town lately, and the magistrates may take rather a strong line. Fortunately, Mr. Mayne is anxious to speak for you on the strength of your long service and good record at the laundry."

"Just as you say." Edith's tone conveyed the indifference she felt. He sighed as he ushered her out.

"Anyone would think the woman wanted to be sent up," he grumbled later to his father.

"Most of these shoplifting cases haven't an idea why they did it, and are knocked flat, and the more intelligent introverts won't tell. Which category is this one in?"

"Oh, the first, I should say. She seems utterly dim."

Mr. Albright, senior, remembered this conversation when he had to appear in court on Edith's behalf at short notice, his son being in hospital with a sudden attack of appendicitis. He read through the file with some interest, and mentally transferred her to his second category of shoplifters, and saw no reason to alter his opinion on meeting his client. Largely owing to the evidence of good character supplied by her employer and her appearance of dreary hopelessness, she got off as a first offender, with a severe warning.

Outside, Mr. Mayne, a humane and charitable man, patted Edith on the shoulder and told her that they were expecting her back at work the next day. He exchanged glances with Mr. Albright over her unresponsive head and hurried off. The formalities completed, she found herself being conducted to the lawyer's car.

"I want you to come back to the office for a moment," he said. "There's a paper to be signed."

They drove in silence.

"I was a fool. I never ought to have taken that watch," she said, almost to herself, with a slight emphasis on the last two words.

"You were lucky in your J.P.s," Mr. Albright remarked conversationally.

"Bloody fools!" she snapped.
"Possibly. But why particularly, Miss Musgrave?"
"First offence! That's all they know."
"Wasn't it?"
"Not likely. Hundred and fourteenth."
"Really!"

Back in the office he watched her signing her name.

"The thing that stands out is that you are not a fool. Therefore you know why you've been behaving like one. Why?"

Surprised out of her lethargy, she stared up at him.

"Way of using my brains. I've never had a chance to," she heard herself saying.

Bit by bit he extracted the whole story.

"I suppose it doesn't make sense to anyone like you," she ended.

"On the contrary, it makes complete sense," he said. "By jove, there wouldn't be any pinching from a shop run by you. You're an expert."

He saw an intent expression come over her face, as if she had caught sight of something important at the end of a long road. Then she opened her handbag and gave him a letter. He read it, noting the date.

"So the watch incident was to be the final kick in the pants for the British public?"

"That's right." She paused, and then went on rather quickly. "Is the money enough to start a little shop? Sweets I'd like. Somewhere by the sea, a good long way fro n here."

"You've plenty of money for that and some over. We'll fix it all for you if you like."

"I'd be grateful," she said sincerely.

"Much better to come back on the world from the other side of the counter," he said, getting up and holding out his hand. "Provided, of course, that you don't try any funny business with weights or change."

"That," she said contemptuously, "wouldn't interest me. Fun enough for me to rig up a pinch-proof shop and watch 'em trying!"

Edith Musgrave sold chewing gum to a pair of long-haired youths in drainpipe trousers, and watched them go out of the shop with sardonic amusement. Then she took a dummy bar of chocolate from a box and replenished the depleted pile on the counter.

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★ ***Another new story by Elizabeth Lemarchand next month***

ALBERTO MORAVIA

Dancing is Life

IN MARCH I reached the age of eighteen and obtained permission from my father to give up my studies. He gave me this permission out of despair, because by now I was four years behind and was the only one in the class who wore long trousers.

My father, who is a man of the old-fashioned type, gave me the permission to leave off studying after a scene I can't describe: he shouted that I was breaking his heart and that he didn't know what to do with me. He finished up by suggesting that I should work in his shop, a big, old, respectable stationery business in the Piazza della Minerva neighbourhood.

I answered simply, " I'd rather die; " and then he took me by the arm and pushed me out of the room. And so, out of sheer despair, I was left free, at eighteen, to do what I liked.

The first thing I did was to buy a magnificent red sweater, a pair of blue American jeans with white seams, six pockets, turn-ups halfway up the shins and a label on the seat, a yellow handkerchief to go round my neck, and a pair of moccasins with brass buckles. My mother, who is very fond of me and always gives in to me in everything, gave me a little portable radio for a birthday present and persuaded my father to let me have a motor cycle.

That same day I went to the hairdresser's and told him to give me a Marlon Brando haircut. While this was being done the manicurist, a rather common little girl, came up and asked me if I wanted her to do my nails. I looked up at her from below and, although she was by no means pretty, rather plain, in fact, I privately decided that this was the woman for me.

I was not mistaken, Giacomina *was* the right girl; and while she was doing my nails, talking, as they do, about this, that, and the other, I discovered that she, like me, had a passion for rock an' roll. I suggested a meeting and she accepted at once. And so, when I left the shop, I was all complete: eighteen years old, a red sweater, blue jeans, a Brando haircut, a radio, a motor cycle, and Giacomina. Life was beginning at last.

Life, for me, meant rocking an' rolling, nothing more than that but also nothing less. I had the devil in me and, thin as a rake as I was, I felt that April that the spring wind carried me along the streets, and that this wind, laden with the smell of flowers and dust, seemed to repeat the beautiful rhythms of rock an' roll.

With my pockets full of fifty-lire pieces and Giacomina on my arm—she had in the meantime given up her job as a manicurist—I spent the whole day going round the bars that had American juke-boxes. I would go in, put a counter for a rock an' roll record into the machine, and then, without more ado, between the coffee machine and the cash desk, improvise a number with Giacomina. I would begin moving my shoulders and hips, my hands held out in front with fingers spread and my mouth wide open, in one corner of the bar; in the opposite corner Giacomina would do the same; then we would meet, dancing, in the midst of a circle of people, customers of the bar or friends of ours who followed us round everywhere as a kind of retinue.

These friends, most of them boys of my own age, teased me a bit for having chosen Giacomina out of all the many girls available, all of them superior to her. It was quite true that Giacomina, as I have already said, could not be called pretty, with her pony-tail hair, her small, sharp face, pale if not positively livid and with red blotches here and there, and her uninteresting eyes of no particular colour. But underneath her skirt she had a pair of frenzied legs which never tired of dancing and which worked in perfect harmony with my own.

It must be understood that between us there was not the faintest shadow of what is called love; nothing but rock an' roll. Anyhow, what is love in comparison with the pleasure of dancing? Just a bit of fondling and foolery and affectation: nothing, less than nothing. Besides, love makes you heavy and stupid;

whereas dancing makes you fly through life like a bird in the sky. No, no question of love; the one thing necessary was to dance.

Giacomina and I were in perfect agreement. Early in the morning I would go and fetch her on my motorbike, with my portable radio tied on to the handlebars; and then off we would fly wherever we felt inclined, into the country, to the seaside, into the suburbs. As soon as we arrived I would turn on the radio to some dance music and we would start dancing. Where, indeed, have I not danced?—on the sand of the seashore, on the asphalt of the streets, on the grass of the open fields, in public squares, and in narrow lanes. If we did not go out, she would come to my home and we would take up the carpet in the sitting-room and dance there. Or sometimes we would go to *her* home and, since they were poor people and had no sitting-room, we would dance on the landing.

In the daytime, as I have said, we went round from one bar to another, followed by our friends, dancing all the time; in the evening we went to a dance hall and very soon created an empty space round us as we danced, while everybody else in the room made a circle round about us and beat time with their hands. Sometimes at night I actually woke up with a jump and felt my feet moving of their own accord under the sheet, still mad to be dancing. Oh, how happy I was! Never in all my life had I been happy in this way.

But unluckily it could not last. I had already noticed, during our expeditions, that Giacomina clung a little too tightly to me as we went along on the motor cycle. And when we stopped she did, indeed, dance, but it appeared to be more in order to please me than because she wanted to do so herself. From time to time she would sigh, and take my hand, and gaze at me with languid eyes. Until finally one day, as we were walking through the pinewood at Castelfusano—I don't quite know how it happened—we found ourselves embracing behind a bush, in a long kiss, a kiss of love.

Annoyed, I said quickly, as soon as we drew apart, "There's no need for this sort of thing."

"Why not," she asked, "seeing that we love one another?"

"Loving doesn't come into the question," I said, still annoyed; "we got on very much better without love."

Then, to my astonishment, she clasped me tightly to her, throwing her arms round my waist and placing my arm so that it lay round her shoulders; and she cried out in a shrill voice, "I love you, I love you, I love you. And I want everybody to know

that we love each other, yes, everybody's got to know it, yes, yes, everybody."

I pushed her away, saying, "Yes, yes, very well, but don't hang on to me like that."

"Why not, if we love each other?"

"Yes, but keep a proper distance."

"Ugh, how perverse you are! If we love each other, it's quite right for us to embrace, isn't it?"

"No," I said harshly, "it isn't right. What I wanted with you was to dance, not to embrace."

Languishingly, she answered, "Darling little Alfredo, we'll do *both*."

Well, well, from that day onwards she became more and more clinging and less and less willing to fly with me through the intoxicating rhythms of rock an' roll. She went on dancing, of course; but without the enthusiasm which is the first condition of dancing well. And, at the slightest opportunity, she clung on to me. Several times I pushed her off violently enough to take her breath away; but it was like talking to a deaf person: the more I pushed her away, the more she clung to me.

Sometimes I said to her, "Today we dance, and that's all. D'you see?"

"Darling Alfredo," she would say, "how can I get through today without giving you even one kiss?"

"Keep the kiss for tomorrow," I replied; "today we dance."

She appeared to accept this with resignation; but then, treacherously, she would jump on me and harass me with kisses. I felt almost suffocated, just as with a playful dog that hurls itself on you and licks your face. In the end I would free myself with a great effort, remove from my mouth the two or three hairs which she, in her impetuosity, had almost made me swallow, and say, "This wasn't what we agreed to. Good-bye. See you tomorrow."

I would go home, put on a gramophone record, then another, then a third; finally, feeling calmer, I would telephone to her. She would come hurrying round; and for that evening we would go back to the good old times, spinning like a couple of tops until late at night. But such returns into the past grew more and more rare. Something was finished between us; I felt this while I was dancing with her. So much so that one day I said to her, "You're not the same as you used to be, my dear."

Obstinately she answered, "It's because I love you."

The thing that irritated me most of all was her mania for doing things in public. It is true that we had always danced the rock an' roll in public; but dancing is one thing and kissing is

another. I pointed this out to Giacomina: "Those same people who applaud you when you dance with me, will whistle at you if you kiss me. There's a time and place for everything."

"That may be so," she replied, "but I want everyone to know that we love each other—yes, yes, everyone." To put it briefly, we were at cross purposes.

One day we took the bus in order to go to a friend's house where we used to gather from time to time to hold rock an' roll competitions. I was in a bad temper, because at lunch my father had made one of his customary scenes; in the end, to calm him down, I had promised him that I would go to the shop and lend a hand there that same afternoon. Of course, I had privately decided that I wouldn't go to the shop at all; but I felt a touch of remorse, and also a certain degree of fear at the thought of the further scene my father would make as soon as he came to know of it. Sullenly I got on to the bus with Giacomina and then remained standing on the rear platform. She, as usual, was clinging to me and gazing at me with those shining eyes that annoyed me so much.

"Do stop looking at me in that way," I said to her.

"I look at you," she answered, "because you're beautiful. Give me a kiss."

"You're crazy."

"Yes, yes, give me a kiss, quickly; I want everyone to know that we love each other."

"Stop it, I tell you! It's not the weather for it today."

For answer, she took a jump, twined her two arms round my neck and kissed me. You should have heard the people in the bus! An elderly gentleman remarked, "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? It's not decent; you should go to your own home if you want to do such things."

Giacomina, still hanging on to me, replied, "And why? We love each other, and we do what we want to do, wherever we please."

"Young lady," said the gentleman, "I am sorry for your parents."

The other passengers, however, were not so polite. Somebody shouted, "You ought to go behind those big bushes in the Borghese Gardens; that's the place." Someone else remarked, "Just look at that poor little fish! Who does she think she is?" And someone else said, "The more skinny they are, the more brazen they are."

Naturally I was forced, though unwillingly, to come to Giacomina's rescue; but as always happens when you do something against your will, I hit upon an unlucky retort. "Be quiet," I

said, " you only talk like that because you're envious." I should never have said it. A chorus of protest greeted my words; then the conductor thought it his duty to rebuke us; and finally, when I told him he ought to be thinking about selling tickets, he stopped the bus and made us get out.

It so happened that we were in the neighbourhood of Piazza Minerva, where my father's stationer's shop was. I felt perfectly calm; it was just as if the incident in the bus had happened a month ago. I said, " Good-bye, Giacomina."

" But I . . ."

" I'm going to the shop now, I promised my father I would. But I'm afraid there's a misunderstanding between us."

" A misunderstanding? "

" For you, the most important thing in life is love. For me—you know what it is. Well, you'd better go home now: I'll telephone you."

" You'll telephone me? "

" Yes, of course."

We were standing in Piazza Minerva, in front of the little marble elephant. I knew I should never telephone her again; and, as I walked away, this thought suddenly brought me a feeling of immense relief. I turned partly round so as to take a last look at her; and it gave me acute pleasure to see that she was alone: it was true, then, I had really left her, I had broken away from her, I was going away for good.

I almost danced into the shop, which at that hot time of early afternoon was deserted, and greeted Bice, the elderly assistant, with a gay, " Hullo, Bice! " I had my portable radio under my arm, and I walked straight through to put it on the table in the back room, adding, " I've come to give you a hand. In the meantime, if you don't mind, we'll have a little music."

The white blinds in the windows of the shop were lowered on account of the sun; inside the shop, amongst all the shelves full of different kinds of stationery, there was a soft half-light, a good smell of paper, a soothing silence. I turned the radio down low and stretched myself out on the old sofa in the back room, which was hard and cool, so that my head was down and my feet propped high up on the curly wooden arm. I was nearly dozing off, to the muffled rhythm of a dance tune, when I heard a little voice saying, " Four large sheets of drawing-paper . . ."

I gave a jump, because I had recognised the voice as that of Ginevra, a young girl from the Art School, who was also a fanatical lover of dancing, and also had a pony-tail, like Giacomina; but Ginevra was fairhaired, with an almost albino face, a

hypocritical expression, and china-blue eyes. I rushed out and took the sheets of paper from Bice's hands. "I'll serve this customer," I said. "How are you, Ginevra?"

"Oh, Alfredo!"

"You can fetch the paper later. Come along in here now; I want you to hear something."

So she followed me into the back room of the shop and I closed the glass door in the face of the astonished old Bice and immediately turned the radio full on. Then, without uttering a word—for she had understood already—I took her round the waist and embarked upon a frenzied dance which, I cannot help thinking, gave expression to the twofold joy of having got rid of Giacomina and of having already found someone to take her place. Finally we fell together, breathless, on to the sofa, and I said to her, "We'll meet again this evening, then; I'll come and fetch you at home."

"How about Giacomina?"

"Don't bother about Giacomina. I'll come and fetch you at nine. But let's be clear about it: it's in order to dance that you're coming with me."

"What should I be coming for, otherwise?"

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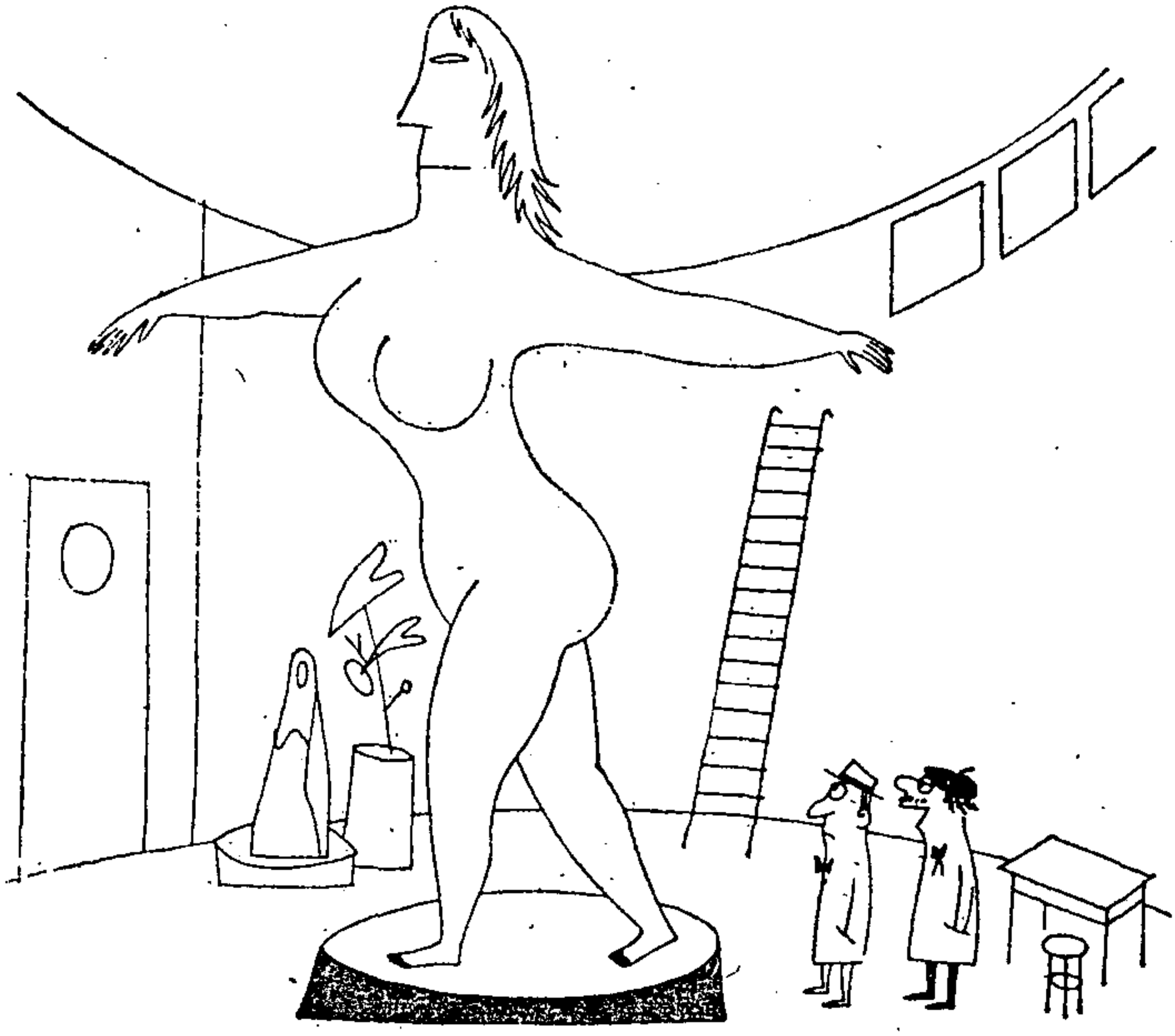

"188—144—192."

BRIGHT PHOENIX

A myriad of white pages stopped butterflying under far green lamps

BY RAY BRADBURY

ONE DAY in April 2022 the great library door slammed flat shut. Thunder.

Hullo, I thought.

At the bottom step glowering up at my desk, in a United Legion uniform which no longer hung as neatly upon him as it had twenty years before, stood Jonathan Barnes.

Seeing his bravado momentarily in pause, I recalled ten thousand Veterans' speeches sprayed from his mouth, the endless wind-whipped flag parades he had hustled, panted through, the grease-cold chicken and green-pea patriot banquets he had practically cooked himself; the civic drives stillborn in his hat.

Now Jonathan Barnes stomped up the creaking main library steps, giving each the full downthrust of his power, weight, and new authority. His echoes, rushed back from the vast ceilings, must have shocked even him into better manners, for when he reached my desk, I felt his warmly liquored breath stir mere whispers on my face.

"I'm here for the books, Tom."

I turned casually to check some index cards. "When they're ready, we'll call you."

"Hold on," he said. "Wait—"

"You're here to pick up the Veterans' Salvage books for hospital distribution?"

"No, no," he cried. "I'm here for *all* the books."

I gazed at him.

"Well," he said, "*most* of them."

"Most?" I blinked once, then bent to riffle the files. "Only ten volumes to a person at a time. Let's see. Here! Why, you let your card expire when you were twenty years old, thirty years ago. See?" I held it up.

Barnes put both hands on the desk and leaned his great bulk upon them. "I see you are interfering." His face began to colour, his breath to husk and rattle. "*I* don't need a card for *my* work!"

So loud was his whisper that a myriad of white pages stopped butterflying under far green lamps in the big stone rooms. Faintly, a few books thudded shut.

Reading people lifted their serene faces. Their eyes, made antelope by the time and weather of this place, pleaded for silence to return, as it always must when a tiger has come and gone from a special fresh-water spring, as this surely was. Looking at these upturned, gentle faces I thought of my forty years of living, working, even sleeping here among hidden lives and vellumed, silent, and imaginary people. Now, as always, I considered my library as a cool cavern or fresh, ever-growing forest into which men passed from the heat of the day and the fever of motion to refresh their limbs and bathe their minds an hour in the grass-shade illumination, in the sound of small breezes wandered out from the turning and turning of the pale soft book pages. Then, better focused, their ideas rehung upon their frames, their flesh made easy on their bones, men might walk forth into the blast-furnace of reality, noon, mob-traffic, improbable senescence, inescapable death. I had seen thousands careen into my library starved, and leave well-fed. I had watched lost people find themselves. I had known realists to dream and dreamers to come awake in this marble sanctuary where silence was a marker in each book.

"Yes," I said at last. "But it will only take a moment to re-register you. Fill in this new card. Give two reliable references—"

"I don't *need* references," said Jonathan Barnes, "to burn books!"

"Contrarily," said I. "You'll need even more, to do that."

"My men are my references. They're waiting outside for the books. They're dangerous."

"Men like that always are."

"No no, I mean the books, idiot. The *books* are dangerous. Good God, no two agree. All the damn double-talk. All the lousy babel and slaver and spit. So, we're out to simplify, clarify, hew to the line. We need—"

"To talk this over," said I, taking up a copy of Demosthenes, tucking it under my arm. "It's time for my dinner. Join me, please—"

I was halfway to the door when Barnes, wide-eyed, suddenly remembered the silver whistle hung from his blouse, jammed it to his wet lips, and gave it a piercing blast.

The library doors burst wide. A flood of black charcoal-burnt uniformed men collided boisterously upstairs.

I called, softly.

Heavily bespectacled, sensitive, a man of wild humour and huge enthusiasms, Ray Bradbury delights in cyclonic conversation and the comfortable normalities of family life. Home is a rambling vintage house shared with his wife, three daughters and two cars including a Thunderbird—his wife's exclusive joy. Refusing to handle a car himself, he as stubbornly refuses to board a jet plane.

Bradbury, who has had seventy-five stories in Argosy, started writing when he was twelve, and in the last twenty-three years has averaged one new story or article a month, sold over a million copies of his Martian Chronicles, appeared in over a hundred and thirty anthologies . . . and resurrected Bright Phoenix. Written in 1947, it slumbered undisturbed in his files. Gradually, ideas collected about it, mushroomed and grew finally to the stature of his famous Fahrenheit 451. Labelled by Bradbury as "a curiosity," the original Phoenix may be the nucleus of this greater work, but it is also a story in its own right, and a brilliant affirmation of the indestructibility of the written word.

They stopped, surprised.

"Quietly," I said.

Barnes seized my arm. "Are you opposing due process?"

"No," I said. "I won't even ask to see your property invasion permit. I wish only silence as you work."

The readers at the tables had leapt up at the storm of feet. I patted the air. They sat back down and did not glance up again at these men crammed into their tight dark char-smeared suits who stared at my mouth now as if they disbelieved my cautions. Barnes nodded. The men moved softly, on tiptoe, through the big library rooms. With extra care, with proper stealth, they raised the windows. Soundlessly, whispering, they collected books from the shelves to toss down towards the evening yard below. Now and again they scowled at the readers who calmly went on leafing through their books, but made no move to seize these volumes, and continued emptying the shelves.

"Good," said I.

"Good?" asked Barnes.

"Your men can work without you. Take five."

And I was out in the twilight so quickly he could only follow, bursting with unvoiced questions. We crossed the green lawn where a huge portable Hell was drawn up hungrily, a fat black tar-daubed oven from which shot red-orange and gaseous blue flames into which men were shovelling the wild birds, the

literary doves which soared crazily down to flop broken-winged, the precious flights poured from every window to thump the earth, to be kerosene-soaked and chucked in the gulping furnace. As we passed this destructive if colourful industry, Barnes mused.

"Funny. Should be crowds, a thing like this. But . . . no crowd. How do you figure?"

I left him. He had to run to catch up.

In the small café across the street we took a table and Barnes, irritable for no reason he could say, called out, "Service! I've got to get back to work!"

Walter, the proprietor, strolled over, with some dog-eared menus. Walter looked at me. I winked.

Walter looked at Jonathan Barnes.

Walter said, "'Come live with me and be my love; and we will all the pleasures prove.'"

"What?" Jonathan Barnes blinked.

"'Call me Ishmael,'" said Walter.

"Ishmael," I said. "We'll have coffee to start."

Walter came back with the coffee.

"'Tiger! Tiger! burning bright,'" he said. "'In the forests of the night.'"

Barnes stared after the man who walked away casually. "What's eating him? Is he nuts?"

"No," I said. "But go on with what you were saying back at the library. Explain."

"Explain?" said Barnes. "My God, you're all sweet reason. All right, I will explain. This is a tremendous experiment. A test town. If the burning works here, it'll work anywhere. We don't burn everything, no no. You noticed, my men cleaned only certain shelves and categories? We'll eviscerate about *forty-nine point two* per cent. *Then we'll report our success to* the overall government committee—"

"Excellent," I said.

Barnes eyed me. "How can you be so cheerful?"

"Any library's problem," I said, "is where to put the books. You've helped me solve it."

"I thought you'd be . . . afraid."

"I've been around Trash-Men all my life."

"I beg pardon?"

"Burning is burning. Whoever does it is a Trash Man."

"Chief Censor, Green Town, Illinois, damn it!"

A new man, a waiter, came with the coffee pot steaming.

"Hullo, Keats," I said.

"'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,'" said the waiter.

"Keats?" said the Chief Censor. "His name isn't Keats."

"Silly of me," I said. "This is a Greek restaurant. Right, Plato?"

The waiter refilled my cup. "'The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness . . . This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears he is a protector.'"

Barnes leaned forward to squint at the waiter, who did not move. Then Barnes busied himself blowing on his coffee: "As I see it, our plan is simple as one and one make two . . ."

The waiter said, "'I have hardly ever known a mathematician who was capable of reasoning.'"

"Damn it!" Barnes slammed his cup down. "Peace! Get away while we eat, you, Keats, Plato, Holdridge, *that's* your name. I remember now, *Holdridge!* What's all this *other* junk?"

"Just fancy," said I. "Conceit."

"Damn fancy, and to hell with conceit, you can eat alone, I'm getting out of this madhouse." And Barnes gulped his coffee as the waiter and proprietor watched and I watched him gulping and across the street the bright bonfire in the gut of the monster device burnt fiercely. Our silent watching caused Barnes to freeze at last with the cup in his hand and the coffee dripping off his chin. "Why? Why aren't you yelling? Why aren't you fighting me?"

"But I am fighting," I said, taking the book from under my arm. I tore a page from Demosthenes, let Barnes see the name, rolled it into a fine Havana cigar shape, lit it, puffed it, and said, "'Though a man escape every other danger, he can never wholly escape those who do not want such a person as he is to exist.'"

Barnes was on his feet, yelling, the 'cigar' was torn from my mouth, stomped on, and the Chief Censor was out of the door, almost in one motion.

I could only follow.

On the sidewalk, Barnes collided with an old man who was entering the café. The old man almost fell. I grabbed his arm.

"Professor Einstein," I said.

"Mr. Shakespeare," he said.

Barnes fled.

I found him on the lawn by the old and beautiful library where the dark men, who wafted kerosene perfume from their every motion, still dumped vast harvestings of gun-shot dead pigeon, dying pheasant books, all autumn gold and silver from the high windows. But . . . softly. And while this still, almost serene, pantomime continued, Barnes stood screaming silently, the

scream clenched in his teeth, tongue, lips, cheeks, gagged back so none could hear. But the scream flew out of his wild eyes in flashes and was held for discharge in his knotted fists, and shuttled in colours about his face, now pale, now red as he glared at me, at the café, at the damned proprietor, at the terrible waiter who now waved amiably back at him. The Baal incinerator rumbled its appetite, spark-burnt the lawn. Barnes stared full at the blind yellow-red sun in its raving stomach.

"You," I called up easily at the men who paused. "City Ordinance. Closing time is nine sharp. Please be done by then. Wouldn't want to break the law— Good evening, Mr. Lincoln."

"'Four score,'" said a man, passing, "'and seven years—'"

"Lincoln?" The Chief Censor turned slowly. "That's Bowman. Charlie Bowman. I know you, Charlie, come back here, Charlie, Chuck!"

But the man was gone, and cars drove by, and now and again as the burning progressed men called to me and I called back, and whether it was, "Mr. Poe!" or hullo to some small bleak stranger with a name like Freud, each time I called in good humour and they replied, Mr. Barnes twitched as if another arrow had pierced, sunk deep in his quivering bulk and he were dying slowly of a hidden seepage of fire and raging life. And still no crowd gathered to watch the commotion.

Suddenly, for no discernible reason, Mr. Barnes shut his eyes, opened his mouth wide, gathered air, and shouted, "Stop!"

The men ceased shovelling the books out of the window above.

"But," I said, "it's not closing time . . ."

"Closing time! Everybody out!" Deep holes had eaten away the centre of Jonathan Barnes' eyes. Within, there was no bottom. He seized the air. He pushed down. Obediently, all the windows crashed like guillotines, chiming their panes.

The dark men, bewildered, came out and down the steps.

"Chief Censor." I handed him a key which he would not take, so I forced his fist shut on it. "Come back tomorrow, observe silence, finish up."

The Chief Censor let his bullet-hole gaze, his emptiness, search without finding me.

"How . . . how long has this gone on . . .?"

"This?"

"This . . . and . . . that . . . and *them*."

He tried but could not nod at the café, the passing cars, the quiet readers descending from the warm library now, nodding as they passed into cold dark, friends, one and all. His blind man's rictal gaze ate holes where my face was. His tongue, anæsthetised, stirred. "Do you think you can all fool me, me, *me*?"

I did not answer.

"How can you be sure," he said, "I won't burn people, as well as books?"

I did not answer.

I left him standing in the complete night.

Inside, I checked out the last volumes of those leaving the library now with night come on and shadows everywhere and the great Baal machinery churning smoke, its fire dying in the spring grass where the Chief Censor stood like a poured cement statue, not seeing his men drive off. His fist suddenly flew high. Something swift and bright flew up to crack the front-door glass. Then Barnes turned and walked after the incinerator as it trundled off, a fat black funeral urn unravelling long tissues and scarves of black bunting smoke and fast-vanishing crêpe.

I sat listening.

In the far rooms, filled with soft jungle illumination, there was a lovely autumnal turning of leaves, faint sifts of breathing, infinitesimal quirks, the gesture of a hand, the glint of a ring, the intelligent squirrel blink of an eye. Some nocturnal voyager sailed between the half-empty stacks. In porcelain serenity, the rest-room waters flowed down to a still and distant sea. My people, my friends, one by one, passed from the cool marble, the green glades, out into a night better than we could ever have hoped for.

At nine, I went out to pick up the thrown front-door key. I let the last reader, an old man, out with me, and as I was locking up, he took a deep breath of the cool air, looked at the town, the spark-burnt lawn, and said, "Will they come back again, ever?"

"Let them. We're ready for them, aren't we?"

The old man took my hand. "'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together.'"

We moved down the steps.

"Good evening, Isaiah," I said.

"Mr. Socrates," he said. "Good night."

And each walked his own way, in the dark.

FILLETED SWEARING BY FOUR FAMOUS PEOPLE

COMM. MARCONI: "You oscillating pentode!"

JULIAN HUXLEY: "You katabolic blastoderm!"

JOHN MASEFIELD: "You anapaestic assonance!"

SIR T. BEECHAM: "You augmented diatonic interval!"

Bank Holiday on Parnassus

when leaves depart

The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose . . .

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

I ran out in the morning, when the air was clean and new
And all the grass was glittering and grey with autumn dew,
I ran out to an apple-tree and pulled an apple down,
And all the bells were ringing in the old grey town.

Down in the town off the bridges and the grass,
They are sweeping up the leaves to let the people pass.
Sweeping up the old leaves, golden-reds and browns,
Whilst the men go to lecture with the wind in their gowns.

FRANCES CORNFORD, *Autumn Morning at Cambridge*

Blossoms—frail and fragrant

In the autumn the little rosy cyclamens blossom in the shade of this west side of the lake. They are very cold and fragrant, and their scent seems to belong to Greece, to the Bacchae. They are real flowers of the past. They seem to be blossoming in the landscape of Phaèdra and Helen. They bend down, they brood like little chill fires. They are little living myths that I cannot understand.

After the cyclamens the Christmas roses are in bud. It is at this season that the cacchi are ripe on the trees in the garden, whole naked trees full of lustrous, orange-yellow, paradisal fruit, gleaming against the wintery blue sky. The monthly roses still blossom frail and pink, there are still crimson and yellow roses. But the vines are bare and the lemon-houses shut.

D. H. LAWRENCE, *San Gaudenzio*

Grapes redden

I love to see, when leaves depart,
The clear anatomy arrive,
Winter, the paragon of art,
That kills all forms of life and feeling
Save what is pure and will survive.

Already now the clanging chains
Of geese are harnessed to the moon:
Stripped are the great sun-clouding planes:
And the dark pines, their own revealing,
Let in the needles of the noon.

Strained by the gale the olives whiten
Like hoary wrestlers bent with toil
And, with the vines, their branches lighten
To brim our vats where summer lingers
In the red froth and sun-gold oil.

Soon on our hearth's reviving pyre
Their rotted stems will crumble up:
And like a ruby, panting fire,
The grapes will redden on your fingers
Through the lit crystal of the cup.

ROY CAMPBELL, *Autumn*

Autumn Vintage

What seasons fermented in Granny Wallon's kitchen, what summers were brought to the boil, with limp flower-heads piled around the floor holding fast to their clotted juices—the sharp spiced honey of those cowslips first, then the coppery reeking dandelion, the bitter poppy's whiff of powder, the cat's-breath, death-green elder . . . The vats boiled daily in suds of sugar, revolving petals in throbbing water, while the air, aromatic, steamy, embalmed, distilled the hot dews and flowery soups and ran the wine down the dripping walls.

And not only flower-heads went into these brews; the old lady used parsnips, too, potatoes, sloes, crab-apples, quinces, in fact anything she could lay her hands on. Granny Wallon made wine as though demented, out of anything at all; and no doubt, if given enough sugar and yeast, could have made a drink out of a box of old matches.

LAURIE LEE, *Cider with Rosie*

Amber Haze

The silver birches are on fire
With a thin gold flame;
The sharp leaves of the briar
Burn with a russet gleam;
The bramble rough with red
Is a smouldering ember,
And beeches though they soon will blaze
As yet are amber.

Grass like a lion's ochre mane
Furs the hard earth;
In hedges down the lane
Nuts swell in the sheath;
While in old gardens still
The summer flowers;
Snapdragons by the flaking wall
Raise up their spires.

Cornelian-bronze the pendant world
Burns in a haze
Of thin mist whitely curled
Like smoke under the trees:
Slow-burning autumn and
Slow-going summer are one,
Deeply asleep, sharing
The same gold dream.

JOHN SMITH, *Slow-burning Autumn*

The autumn days went slowly by, dragging the last warm apricots and crimsons from the sun. It was a time of mother-of-pearl mists, changing to soft reds and yellows as the sun gained its puny strength, and then lengthened into shadows . . .

Down the lane the briar hung in circlesa and garlands with ruddy-veined leaves and cursed ill-luck late blackberries. Susan picked up fallen acorns and gathered bunches of nuts as she skipped through the wood, families of five and six on a stem, which she took to school.

She snatched branches of hawthorn and ate the fleshy crimson aiges as her breakfast dessert, washing them down with water from a spring which ran through the bracken.

The hawthorns and hollies were full of field-fares and red-wings, clearing away the fruit like ragamuffins let loose in a greengrocer's shop. Squirrels ran up and down the nut trees and beeches, carrying nuts to their hoards.

ALISON UTTLEY, *The Country Child*

This month's Argosy reprint

A VISIT TO THE DENTIST

BY WILLIAM SANSOM

FEEL anything now?"

"A little," he lied. With every second gained the anæsthetic would take a surer hold: how could he be certain the dentist had prodded him in exactly the most sensitive place? Better to make sure.

He lay back in the chair with his mouth still wide open—and in that tormented position, and with his startled staring eyes, anyone who knew Pemberton would have thought him to be smiling, for he had naturally that way of smiling, when he smiled he made this unnatural face of horror, bared teeth and pop-eyes—Pemberton lay back thus and watched the high window-framed patch of darkening sky: the same quietly clouded sky that would soon turn pink or pall to a winter's mauve over Kew, dear safe Kew, faraway Kew with its quiet gardens and his homely turreted house. His house would be sitting there all this time, knowing nothing of its master's predicament.

But the dentist had only walked once over to the nurse before he was back again prodding, this time nonchalantly, without asking what was felt, and before Pemberton could speak or even make his delaying noise—a deep groaned guttural vowel—a hand was over his mouth concealing—kind conjurer!—the wink of a bright instrument, a white arm was braced dark against the sky, he heard inside his ears a crunching, felt nothing, saw the arm arc swiftly back to place something on the tray, then instantly brace back again, brace, crunch, arc, brace, crunch, arc, five times, and so expertly that Pemberton could make no sound, his mouth in any case immobilised wide, and then his head was gently pushed forward and the dentist, with the grave, knowing smile reserved to his calling, was saying, "Would you spit, please?" and out of his mouth into the glass bowl with its little circular hiss of water he

saw his blood drop, not with horror, but with a beautiful relief. He had felt nothing. Condemned, he had been reprieved. He looked up at the dentist with worship of such dexterity, with love. This passed quickly to a sensation of personal bravery. I got through. It was nothing. He felt like a man who has pulled somebody from the Thames and slips anonymous away from his congratulators.

But the dentist was already inserting a machine in his mouth, a contrivance he was destined to live with every hour of the day during what he could not but think of as his "new life."

A manipulation of fingers. Out came the machine again. A little chiselling with the drill, a bit off here, a little there—the room was suddenly a kind of pottery school—and at last the set, the bridgework, the denture was judged perfect.

"How d'you feel?" asked the dentist. "All right?"

"Fine," Pemberton whistled.

"You'll feel it a bit later," the dentist sympathised, handing him a little envelope of pills. "Take a couple of these, they'll make you more comfortable."

"Thank you." And again that astonishing whistle.

His jaw was still dead, it might have been air, but already the sensitive tongue was at work, licking like a ferrety tentacle at this big hard new thing in his mouth, astounded at the bulk of it—and with this, his spirit of bravery sank. Could one keep such an alien edifice in one's mouth? And would this dreadful whistle continue? He turned to the dentist and, for something to say, whistled, "I feel like a cage in a bird."

At which they all smiled, and after the final instructions, Pemberton was out in the street, coated and hatted, umbrella-ed like anyone else, looking on the ordinary pavement like any ordinary man.

He walked out into Wigmore Street and whistled for an evening paper. The man seemed to notice nothing odd. Pemberton had wondered at first if the man would stare at him curiously, or laugh, but when neither of these things happened, when the man simply went on shouting, WAPPING PIER POLICE COMB SHADWELL—instead of wondering in his usual vague way what overweight peer (the enormous Lord Shadwell?) had his hair done at Scotland Yard, instead of his usual dismay at the amount you are expected to understand in this enormously parochial modern world, Pemberton felt rise in him instead a tearful desire to tell the man what had happened to him, the news momentous that here was he, Pemberton, at a definite moment of life, having parted with five of his own well-used

most personal incisors and molars to make way for a plate of false ones—a critical moment in life that he had heard referred to, with felicity but some omen, as "the change-over."

But Pemberton would never have spoken thus to a newspaperman, or to any stranger—he was by nature recessive, a slow-speaking, slow-thinking man of retired habit. Equally, the newspaperman would have shown no interest in his news—he would probably have reacted like the shopkeeper to whom one boasts of a long holiday abroad and whose only reply is, "Oh? Thought I hadn't seen you the last day or two." People were always having holidays abroad and teeth out. Why should anyone else be expected to worry? Yet indignation, and this tearful sense of injustice, filled him as he whistled his thank-you and turned, unextraordinary, away.

He walked along tasting blood. The right side of his mouth was still paralysed; he must surely have spoken lopsided, with his lips blocked stiff? His tongue was working all the time; it seemed to be quite out of control, a creature working on its own, licking and jabbing and darting back startled, peering and sniffing and retreating, like a wet puppy's nose with a hedgehog. And what a hedgehog! Would it be possible to live with such a contraption? It felt far too big. And suddenly in his mind's eye he remembered how, when he had had a tooth extracted before, the mirror had shown his gums naturally pink and then, where the tooth had been, a deep dark hole as red as a dark plush curtain. As rich as the taste of blood itself—yet how oddly alien, how excessively rich was this taste of his own uncooked blood!

He walked on, wanting to get his tongue past the denture into those dark deep holes, his own holes: but the new thing kept him out. It was worse than wanting to squeeze a forbidden spot. And meanwhile the buses passed, the coats and hats hurried along, the great hum of the traffic's acceleration echoed the London air and electric lights began to flick at the eye, making it dusk, a winter's dusk. Suppose, he suddenly thought, they were somebody else's teeth? Then, for once, he thanked heaven for the plastic industries.

Thus preoccupied, and having turned up and down several streets, Pemberton felt abruptly tired—perhaps the shock of the wound was telling on his nerves?—and decided to sit down with a cup of tea. He looked round him for a teashop. A little farther on a bright-neoned window announced coffee. Yet it seemed to be a flower shop, the window was tropical with big-leaved plants. Through his preoccupation he saw with precise distaste that they could not even spell coffee correctly. Caffee, it said. Well, perhaps they could at least make the stuff? A cup of coffee, in the

circumstances, would certainly be more stimulating than tea. He walked along and went inside.

But it seemed to be a restaurant, it was so profusely decorated and expensively half-lit. He hesitated, his mind still on his teeth, and now further confused by this sudden mistake. But he felt too tired, and perhaps they would allow him to sit with a sandwich? He would certainly have to sit down. He took off his coat, looked for a peg, and finally hung it on a set of antlers, which seemed to be the rule here.

He sat down at a small table whose cloth seemed to be a kind of tartan—or was it graph-paper?—covered with ink-bursts. Not very clean, he thought, but so much the better for his purse. Then his eye, always a little short-sighted and in his confusion the more so, saw that behind a bar, whose central eminence was an immense machine of silver—it conveyed to him the luxury of wine-buckets and duck-presses—there stood a tall blue-eyed Chinese in a white jacket. He thought a second time about his purse: for some reason only expensive restaurants employed coloured servants. But in any case he was too tired to move. Soho, he thought hopefully, might have extended since *his* days.

Pemberton was not more than forty-five years old in years: but in experience of the contemporary world he was much older. He had " retired " young. He lived alone in a small stucco villa at Kew, a house quiet and dim as its ivy and the dust on its old silk blinds. He never visited London proper, and practically his only excursions were into the Gardens an avenue away. When he did go to London, it was by cab to a club or to an old friend's house; sometimes he took the old metropolitan train to Hampstead to visit an aunt and relatives local to her. He was in no acute sense a recluse, but his only real contact with the outside world was by the eye rather than by the explanatory ear: and about what he saw he was incurious. He was too deeply involved in his own occupation. He was a botanist, and one who preferred to the field his own greenhouses, a theorist who wrote learnedly on his subject and lived quietly secluded, cultivating from a distance other people's gardens. He took a newspaper, but scarcely read it.

Like many other men his preferences were for the older fashions of his childhood home, which itself had maintained the traditions of earlier generations; but unlike most men he was able to practise this preference. Fortune, or a magical selection in such matters, had granted him a cook-housekeeper nearly seventy years old and as conservative as himself. Among solid Victorian furniture that smelled of blankets and fruit, they had

the electricity—there was no fabricated nonsense about keeping the gas—and there was even running water in one bedroom, though not his. The bath had huge brass taps, big-eared as sitting hares, and his housekeeper still wore a cap.

Although a man of small passion, Pemberton had developed one particularly strong dislike: he loathed objects made from modern plastic materials. Naturally some of these had been imported into the house. He noticed that the brown brittle electric light sockets soon split, he had broken his fingernails trying to open a plastic-sealed medicine carton, somebody had once sent him a set of occasional cups and saucers whose very touch and unusual lightness had inspired something near to horror in him. And now, he reflected, as he sat in this strange restaurant, he had a plastic device in his mouth for life . . . His mind mused on. Better than somebody else's teeth anyway. And hadn't teeth always been plastic? Would he have fussed as much about an old-fashioned vulcanite telephone? He tried to think fairly on the subject.

A woman was standing above him, a lady in a smart coloured dress. Her black hair shone with pomade, mascara-ed eyes lowered at him a long glance of sulky question. She looked like a foreigner, and a moment later he was sure, for she was asking him something in a foreign language. "Espresso?" she said. And as he made no answer, "Cappucino, then?"

He rose awkwardly, pushing the little table aside. It collided with the next little table, whose coffee jumped in quick single spouts from the cups to soak, with elastic attraction, cakes set nearby.

"Oh, I *am* so sorry," he whistled to his neighbour, who, he was startled to note, seemed to have bright blue hair, an impossibility, but difficult to confirm now—he would apologise in a moment, for obviously this foreign lady needed something first and, from her expression, urgently. Perhaps he was sitting at her table?

"Is-this-your-table-madam?" he asked, enunciating each word with an especially clear whistle for the foreign ear.

The lady suddenly smiled, her lips making a shape down-drawn as the silent howl of a tragic mask. "Of course it's mine. I wouldn't be here else, would I?" Then her lips closed on a thin breath of impatience. But at least the lady did speak English.

He smiled. "Then do please sit down."

"Sit down? *Me?*"

"Yes. I'm sure there's plenty of room . . ."

He was going to say "for me elsewhere" when the lady's face showed an abrupt change, this time expressing with a creased

forehead and a painful widening of mouth and cheeks the stretched pain-belly laugh of a Grecian comedy mask. Yet from this joviality there issued an opposite voice of disgust, "Fresh, eh? I know your sort. All you'll get is a cup of fresh coffee from me. Now do you want one or not?"

Pemberton hardly knew what to say. Her attitude seemed to be one both of rebuke and invitation. It would be best, perhaps, to accept.

"Thank you," he stammered, "thank you indeed."

"Then if you'll sit down quiet, I'll bring it you."

She turned with a whirled refusal of skirts, and hurried away. Only then did it occur to him that—yes, for there were similar ladies moving about with trays—she might be a waitress.

"Now what about these cakes?" a big brown voice boomed in his ear. He turned to face the lady whose hair burnt blue as a police lamp.

The face beneath was old with reproach. It was grey, and the greyer for an incast beam of palest neon that mortified her, through the croton-leaves, from the window outside. Now the reproach turned to sharp distaste as, with that common but always unbelievable motion of aggression, head unashamedly moving, eyes travelling their slow frown, she looked him up and down.

"I'm so sorry," he whistled. "Intolerably awkward of me. We'll have them replaced and you must allow me to pay."

"I should think so indeed!" the woman said, nodding and sniffing at the same time. But still she looked at him with a kind of nausea drawing back her lip. What could he have done to deserve this? At that moment the anæsthetic began to loose its hold on his jaw, he felt the first thrust of a raw dull pain, and his lower lip fell, so that suddenly he realised he was facing her with what might have been a similar expression of nausea. He might have been copying her, making faces. He turned hastily away. The matter, in any case, seemed to be closed.

He remembered that he had left the analgesic tablets in his overcoat pocket. He managed to rise without knocking the little ham-shaped table off its thin metal legs—and was feeling for the tablets in his overcoat pocket, when suddenly that smart, sultry waitress was by his side. She wore again the comedy mask, the dangerous one.

"Your coffee's on the table," she said accusingly. "Not by any chance leaving us, are you?"

"What? Of course not, no."

"I thought not," she said, looking at the overcoat as if it was already making its own way to the door. And then she waited,

ostentatiously whistling and swivelling her heel, until he had found what he wanted, and returned to his table.

He noticed that the woman with the blue hair was bent in conspiracy with the two people who were sitting next to her—for they all sat at these small tables squashed together—a young woman whose hair sprouted from the back like a fountain of muddy water or perhaps a horse's tail, together with a young man whose white and pimpled jaw was outlined with a shaved charcoal-line of beard. They appeared to be whispering about him; for all three stopped and shot upright and separated like righted skittles as he approached. He disregarded them, though he was getting a little angry—after all, he had done all he could. He had apologised? He had offered to pay? And perhaps this irritation alerted him for a moment or two. He sat down and for the first time looked carefully around him.

His eye had already observed the plants lining the window—warm-weather stuff, crotons and castors and rubbers. But now he saw that this noiseless green flora had a silent faunal accompaniment—in a cage just past the end of the row of plants, there sat, morose, with inward-searching eyes, three large birds with brilliant blue knobs on their heads. With their long beaks down-pressed, and their necks hunched in high feathered collars, they looked like a row of little old cold men ruminating upwards on such terrible tumours pressed upon them by an ironical Fate: they did nothing to amuse the company for whose benefit they must have been present, they sat silent and motionless: they might have been stuffed but for one small movement—every few minutes over one or other of six hate-filled eyes there crept a web of thin putty-coloured skin that stayed, then lowered for a long neuralgic moment, an eclipse like the tender tiredness of all time, before suddenly snapping back to reveal the old malevolence altogether refreshed.

Behind these birds stretched a wall of Stewart tartan dotted with bamboo baskets trailing philodendra; northern antlers conflicted with a tropic plantain wide as a green eagle's wing; on a southern adobe stretch of rough plaster, a claymore cut its hardy line, and a giant thistle of illuminated amber cast curious shadows on a dead venetian blind; stools made of elkhorn crowded against the bamboo bar, a full-size reproduction of *The Stag at Bay* was framed with raffia. The Chinese behind the bar wore a turquoise kilt, which was an extravagance, for his legs were rarely seen. Through the smoke of cigarettes, the subtropical plants, the steam rising from coffee, and the steam on the window there could be seen the red tops of passing, grinding buses.

Pemberton sat there, bewildered. He had never seen anything like this. It occurred to him that once he had read of the Scottish baronial castles of Chile, where Spanish-speaking families lived among the antlers and Victoriana of their bridge-building ancestors. But what a queer motif to select! . . . Pemberton expected a restaurant to be conservative in English tradition—cream and oak, or mildly rococo. There had been Romano's and so on—but surely this was going a bit far? He shook his head at such brittle extravagance, noticed that a southern-eyed man serving next to the Chinaman wore a shirt busy with coloured drawings of the Eiffel Tower, and returned, much shaken, to his own more intimate problems.

He faced the coffee, served in a transparent plastic cup. He lifted this with distaste—but the coffee was certainly good. Yet such a sudden hot liquid brought a new twinge of pain to his aching jaw. The dentist had smiled, "What people hate most about having teeth out is losing part of themselves. They're maternal about their ivory." Despite the intended cathartic of this confidence, Pemberton did feel, perturbably, that he had lost part of himself. Never again, said his aching jaw; never, never, never. It was simply another step on the hopeless downward voyage of decay. And most deeply of all, this loss conflicted with the middle-aged illusion that somehow, somewhere, youth will be found again.

From behind a group of gamboge gourds a rich and reedy tropical music played, a canned clanking of burro skulls and a shaking of seeds to hiss exotic rhythms, an echoing ghost-chatter to the human chatter all around: smoke rose, spoons tinkled—but most sounds were softened in so much foliage and tartan; one of the birds abruptly gave a long rising shriek, then as abruptly left off—it had been simply not worth while: steam rose from behind the great glittering coffee machine on which was written, *It works without steam*: and meanwhile Pemberton was thinking, Will I be like one of those men, who, reading, are seen slowly to project their denture on tongue-tip right out over the lower lip, pause, then silently withdraw the thing?—and quickly shook his head free of such thoughts. He must wake himself up. No use sitting there regretting the contraption like an old dog with a tin can tied to his tail. It was there, locked up in him, and that was that. If he had to rely on a foreign body inside him—well, he would: after all, we wear boots, braces, corsets . . .

He decided to improve the moment, took out his notebook and glanced over the crotons behind. Something might occur to him.

From the dark beneath the table a furry little head shot up,

warm against his knee. Still looking at the crotons, he said, "Pretty puss, puss, puss," as his hand went down to stroke it,

"I beg your pardon?" said the woman with blue hair, whose face lay just to the right of the croton at which he was peering.

Confused, he said, "Nice pussy, I said."

"And *who* are you calling nice pussy, may I ask?"

He smiled and shook his head. Pemberton's awful smile spread across his face, his eyes popped, and a mouth of terror formed itself: one would have thought he had been stabbed suddenly in the back.

Thus the two regarded each other with what seemed a mimicked disgust. "Naturally," he said, "I was referring to this little pussycat here."

He looked down and saw the sharp eyes of a poodle staring up at him.

"Well, *really*!" the woman said. "And do you usually refer to dogs as puss—you ask *me* to believe that?" A man was now sitting opposite her. She addressed him. "First the waitress, and now *me*. It's disgusting. This man should be turned right out."

He was a large man, with a sand-coloured beard, on a tough putty skin. In spite of the warmth—though perhaps because he had only just arrived—he was still wearing over his head the hood of his duffle-coat, and now Pemberton found staring at him with cold sloe eyes what appeared to be an enormous khaki Santa Claus, beard and duffle and eyes were all one muddy monotone.

In the pause that followed, and during which the duffle-coat seemed to swell with breath for battle, Pemberton looked anxiously from this new Santa Claus to the poodle. The poodle gazed back, pert with sophistication, from beneath its fringe. I love you, the eyes said.

Pemberton's brain was hammering back: . . . and I hate your frilly little doggy hide—when he saw suddenly, in the way a relevant truth like a new learnt word reveals itself in multiple, that there were several other poodles in the restaurant, many ladies had poodles to knee or leashed, and only poodles. No other dogs. Could there be some poodle-show about?

In the same paralysed second he saw too what the florescence of the kilted Chinese and his Eiffel-towered colleague had so far obscured—now that his neighbours were largely turned round and looking at him, he saw that besides this blue-haired woman and her khaki Santa Claus there surrounded him a really most extraordinary lot indeed. A drawn young woman with straight silver hair drooped to either side like the wig of a half-drowned hanging Judge; another girl who looked like a monstrous two-

legged fly in thin long black trousers—this one's hair was again dressed like a horse's tail! And how many of these there seemed to be! But the air pranced with a wagging of tails! While the men seemed to have had their heads nearly shaved, other girls had their hair short and ragged as a guttersnipe's, and their big painted eyes looked starved and ghostly. Could these be Londoners? In the soft pink light, with that odd music and patches of darkness and the hum of talk . . . he was confused, he thought, If I tried to describe them nobody'd believe me, and passed his hand over his eyes, then looked again and saw they were real, they were still there . . . and now they were all staring at him as the big duffle-coat expended its toad's breath in a raised voice, deep and adenoidal. "What was that you said to this lady?"

Once more Pemberton smiled, but now broadly, and his look of horror grew intense. He began emphatically to end all this, "A silly mist—" he began, but two such emphatic sibilants blasted out a really loud whistle. Unfortunately it nearly corresponded to the two notes of an American street-call.

"Oh!" screamed the blue-haired woman.

"Well, *well*!" said the big man, rising.

"Trying to take the mike out of us, are you?" said the big man, now huge at his full height.

Pemberton said sharply, "Taking the what? I'm afraid I don't . . ."

"You don't understand plain English, eh? Well, I can rumble your type all right."

"Rumble? This is all Greek to me." Pemberton felt suddenly that the only thing was to laugh away such an absurd misunderstanding, to be jocular. "And I haven't my Liddell and Scott handy—"

He laughed. But nobody else did.

"Being funny?" the big man said, leaning forward.

Voices were saying behind, "Tried to get off with the waitress. And now molesting this lady!" . . . "Drunk" . . . "More likely the Wapping thug." . . . "That poor little girl." . . . "They say he's the Wapping man." . . . "Nonsense!" . . .

"I said, being funny?" the man repeated.

Pemberton was getting to his feet, edging up difficultly between the rocking little table and his chair. Only a self-possessed man would have remained sitting; in his confusion Pemberton felt he must stand if the other man was standing. But at the same time he was cursing himself for bringing the lexicon into this—of course, they would never have understood. His mind snatched for another reference book. The first thing that came he said.

"Well, let's say my Baedeker."

That was silly too, he thought.

But all around the word seemed to have taken effect. The air gasped surprise.

" *What* did you say? " the woman screamed.

Somebody a table off said out loud, " Something about bed, he said."

" Said he wants to go to bed with her." . . .

It was no good, anything he did or said was turned upside down. It was absurd, absurd—but there it was, actually happening, a mad little misunderstanding ballooning out of all proportion to him, and who he was, and where he was. To where he was—he was in London all right, but the place, these people? . . . They looked suddenly like a circle of the soft strange mad in fancy dress, staring at him, cooing their eyes at him . . . it began to look unreal as a real madhouse . . . and he was abruptly conscious of hate massing at him, of all eyes closing in a circle round him, of the feeling of a solitary boy ringed with bullies preening for strength and loving what they are going to do . . . led by Santa Claus, whose eyes were hard and loving, a humourless man measuring him, a man who liked to order things, a cold straightener-up, the kind who would take your car to pieces or jump at the chance of directing traffic, who loved his little power seriously . . . and whose duffle-coat arm suddenly shot out and grasped his coat collar. " Come on, I've had enough."

" Steady on! " Pemberton gasped, pulling back. " Take your hands . . ."

" You're going out that door."

" I most certainly am *not*."

The man tugged. It jolted Pemberton's wounded mouth, and he suddenly cried, " I've had my teeth out! "

It was a cry from the heart, a pathetic cry of last distress—and just then the man pulled too hard, the table went over, Pemberton came suddenly stumbling through, his hand shot out to save himself, it caught the man on his cheek, the man thought Pemberton had struck at him, perhaps his mind was still ringing with the word " teeth " for he drew his fist back and hit Pemberton sharply in the mouth. It was not a heavy, premeditated blow. It was a tap in the muddle of a moment. But it broke Pemberton's new teeth.

Pemberton staggered back, tasting blood again, his mouth open and red. The man stood for a moment very still. Then with shocking agility for a large man in such a large coat, he disappeared —he slid through the waitresses and was out of the glass door before Pemberton, through broken teeth, could speak. Righteous

one moment, confused perhaps by the table crashing, the man must have suddenly thought, assault and police station and court and all the trouble that would have meant. So he had cut away.

Now an Italian in a tartan waistcoat, the manager, had come up and his arm was round Pemberton, soothing him, hurrying him towards the kitchen. Pemberton was pointing back at the woman with blue hair and trying to explain. "I want her name, she knows his name," he kept repeating, but the manager soothed him with "yes" and "in a minute" while over Pemberton's shoulder he gestured at the woman to leave. There would be no scandal at La Tartana.

So that when, a few minutes later, Pemberton had washed his mouth and, with his broken denture wrapped in a handkerchief, had returned, the woman was gone. Nobody knew her name. Nobody knew anything. Pemberton tried over and over again to get some explanation, a witnessing of what five minutes before had been so evident.

But nobody wanted to be part of this. The gramophone was turned up, and everybody chatted more urgently over their coffee.

Powerless, raging now with injustice, he snatched at his coat and went for the door to look for a policeman. But outside his eye caught sight of a clock. Illuminated, it said quarter past five.

He hailed a cab. There would be just time, he thought, to get to the dentist.

ODE TO A DENTAL HYGIENIST

Hygienist, in your dental chair
I sit without a single care.
Except when tickled by your hair.
I know that when you grab the drills
I need not fear the pain that kills.
You merely make my molars clean
With pumice doped with wintergreen.
So I lean back in calm reflection,
With close-up views of your complexion,
And taste the flavour of your thumbs
While you massage my flabby gums.
To me no woman can be smarter
Than she who scales away my tartar,
And none more fitted for my bride
Than one who knows me from inside.
At least as far as she has gotten
She sees how much of me is rotten.

EARNEST A. HOOTON

WITCHERY

I'd be lost in the wonder of the strange exotic perfume that clung round her

BY HAZEL WARD

WAS my Aunt Adelia really a witch? All through my childhood I was convinced of it, for did not I hear my handsome, black-eyed papa say so one torrid afternoon as they came out of the summerhouse together? I asked Mamma and I recollect that she looked troubled, indeed a little frightened. But she smiled gently and said, "Nay, child, witches were dealt with a long while ago." Yet the thought persisted and so it does to this day. Certainly if she was not a witch she had some unholy alliance with the devil. But I adored her just the same and even after all these years her memory will set the blood coursing through my veins the quicker.

For days and sometimes for weeks before her visits the undercurrent of excitement grew, and by the time Papa went off to meet her the atmosphere was charged to the point of explosion. Nor was her arrival ever an anti-climax for, from the moment her entourage entered the drive, pandemonium broke loose. The dogs went wild, the rooks left the trees and circled high overhead, adding their raucous chorus to the overwhelming clatter. Then amid an ever increasing pile of boxes would descend my Aunt Adelia. Tall, slender, and elegant, she was utterly beautiful. Her raven-black hair, her deep violet eyes fringed with long sweeping lashes, her ivory pallor: all a perfect foil for outrageous colour contrasts and combinations.

If fashion decreed clerical grey she would appear in canary yellow with perhaps the very palest grey gloves added as a sop to her conscience; or if earth brown was deemed correct she would, from sheer perversity, choose to wear pristine white or some quite shocking shade of pink. Yet such was the cut and simplicity of her clothes that no one, however shocked, could accuse her of garishness.

Her sables—my Aunt Agatha said most spitefully that they were stolen from their dead mamma's fur chest before the poor dear was cold in her coffin—were fabulous. Then she would come forward and embrace my gentle little mamma, and her eyes

would quickly scan the sober gown, the mousy hair, and the tiny rounded form. This was a moment I learnt to hate, and I knew without doubt there would be a fleeting glance in Papa's direction before her low throaty laugh came in greeting. But then, with a light movement, she would swing me into her arms and I would be lost in the wonder of her, in the strange exotic perfume which clung round her, and nothing would be left save adoration and excitement.

The climax of the day came when in the evening I was allowed to watch the unpacking of my aunt's many boxes. Seated in a large armchair before a roaring fire, even in summer—this was simply odd until I put a more sinister interpretation to it—I marvelled at the frothy negligés, the lacy petticoats, the many and varied gowns. Then, by long ritual, the last box which always contained my present—this a source of distress to Mamma and the subject and object of Papa's wrath.

Wantonly extravagant, undeniably unsuitable, and wholly unexpected, these gifts were time and again confiscated the moment my aunt left the house.

"Ma chère," she would murmur softly, clasping a necklet of moonstones round my throat, "they are magic stones, strange and beautiful," and she would weave stories round them, speaking in that low husky voice until I was well nigh mesmerised.

Once there was a kitten. I had prayed and implored Papa to let me have a kitten, but he was adamant. With two gun dogs and a mastiff in the house, a kitten had little chance of survival, he argued. Then my aunt appeared with a rakish black kitten which, she whispered to me before it was revealed to Papa, would put a spell on him and the dogs, since it was sired of the devil and was to be called Lucifer.

And cast a spell the kitten did. Papa roared with laughter as it sat on the palm of his hand spitting and snarling with the ferocity of a tiger. That was only the beginning, for there was no softness about this kitten. Inside a month the lace curtains were in shreds, the upholstery ruined, and the mastiff savaged near to blindness. It streaked about the house wreaking havoc and destruction, and finally, frothing at the mouth and shrieking what I thought were imprecations from the devil, it went raving mad.

I knew from that moment that my aunt really was a witch. I asked her how she became one and she looked amused and asked how I had guessed, so I told her what I had heard Papa say, and about the kitten. I plied her with questions and found her knowledge to be inexhaustible. She was personally acquainted with every witch and warlock of her day, she said, and she told

me of infamous witches hung and burnt long ago: of their potions and their spells; of Chattox and Demdike and the whole brood of them, and of the way they lived and how they died. She recited the old Witchcraft Acts and then told me not to distress myself unduly about her ultimate fate, as the devil always looked after his own.

With one visit came a pair of gold slippers. I never knew how my Aunt Adelia came by them, for they had high heels and glittering buckles and my feet were very small, for I was only seven. The crackle of the tissue paper as she unwrapped them and the agony of suspense before they were finally revealed set my heart knocking against my ribs and my breath fluttering in painful gasps. The slippers were exquisite and I knew, with a terrible certainty, that Papa would burn them. My aunt put them on my feet and carried me to the long dressing-mirror where I stood transfixed with delight. Then I sat in the chair and she took them and held them before the fire, and the gold took on the red glint of the flames and the little buckles winked and sparkled liked a thousand diamonds. Aunt Adelia told me that shoes such as these could lead me to princes, and could dance round the whole wide world finding laughter and adventure.

Papa did burn the shoes, but it was too late for by then they had put a spell on my feet which has since led me into places and situations not of my seeking and beyond my understanding.

My beautiful aunt had married at the age of seventeen and was widowed three years later. It was whispered inside the family that she had lived on her wits ever since. At first I was at a loss to know how this could be, but her wits must have served her remarkably well, for she met every situation to which it pleased God and the devil to call her, with aplomb.

That Aunt Adelia was a creature of many parts is undeniable, and it was not entirely fortuitous that among her many gifts was that of forgery. Indeed my grandpapa held himself to be solely responsible for this, having agreed—under pressure—to a Writing Course for Young Ladies which reserved its highest award for the perfect reproduction of any twelve signatures. My aunt swept the board. Small wonder that Papa locked away all Deeds and Bonds before her arrival and roared his way round the house crying, " Man the bastions, an enemy cometh."

I once heard my Aunt Agatha—fortunately she came but rarely to visit us—say this same gift had led to the untimely end of Adelia's young husband, such was the shock of finding his wealth and property transferred by stealth into her pocket. But I never could abide my Aunt Agatha and I am willing to wager she spoke with malice aforethought.

However, it was about this time that my grandpapa took to making long and perilous journeys to foreign parts, saying that in order to protect his solvency he needed to be beyond reach for two-thirds of the year. When he died it was found that a good many of his attempts at a fair and even distribution of his modest fortune had been replaced by facsimile copies naming Adelia as sole beneficiary. I continued to adore my aunt even when I knew she would with but small compunction have made a beggar of my little mamma.

The chagrin my aunt must have felt on finding her inheritance in trust was not immediately apparent when she visited us the following summer, but it was soon borne upon me that she had bewitched my Papa. I found her in the kitchen a few days after her arrival boiling an evil-smelling potion, and on my asking the nature of the brew she replied, "It's a spell, little one, and any that come under it shall be my slave and the devil's for ever."

She moved her hands over the pot, incanting as she stirred, and I repeated after her, "Stir the waters, devil's daughters. Stir the cauldron, stir it fast."

We went into the garden and I watched as Aunt Adelia sprinkled the dark liquid over the many pixie rings. I shouted a desperate warning as Papa inadvertently stepped within one of the rings, but it was of no avail, and he only laughed when Aunt Adelia told him his soul was now in the devil's clutches.

But it was from that moment that a sinister change came over our household. My mamma's face became pale and sad, and it was as though a light had gone out in her. Papa's laughter was no longer heard and waves of evil ran through our home like living things. There was a hard brilliance about my beautiful aunt that I had never before observed, and an implacable hatred and boldness in Papa's eyes as he met her mocking gaze. By day I wandered alone in the woods, tense and waiting for I knew not what. By night I lay cold and apprehensive. I knew it was of no use to pray, since Papa's soul was with the devil. But, had not Aunt Adelia stood in that ring too and had not I heard Papa say she was on excellent terms with that same devil? I knew there would have to be a sacrifice, for many times I had heard Mamma say there had to be sacrifices in marriage for the preservation of life and home. True I had never seen a sacrifice, so I did not know what Mamma and Papa offered, but I knew well enough what sacrificial demands the devil would make. Then when I was well nigh at my wits' end to know how to divert the devil's attention from Papa, my aunt noticed my lassitude and took me off on a picnic to Bredon Hill.

It was fitting that Aunt chose Bredon because by repute this

had always been a place of witches. Had not the Justices caused a beacon to be lighted there on the night the last of the witches perished, and had not the ghosts of all the witches in Christendom been seen flying, broomstickwise, over the conflagration before disappearing with wild shrieks into the valley below? I surreptitiously gathered the berries of the woody nightshade as we wandered up the hillside, for I knew now what must be done. Then at the summit my aunt lay back to scan a suddenly darkening sky.

I looked as she lay there with her raven hair flung back. She was utterly and completely beautiful. I wondered how it would have been had she not been a witch: probably like little Mamma or Aunt Agatha, and with this latter thought came the realisation that even with the perils involved I would have her remain a witch. But of a sudden there was a menacing silence around us and the storm clouds were gathering fast and I was afraid. It was not easy to be a sacrifice and my dilemma was fearful, for the prospect of meeting the devil face to face froze me with horror, whilst life, with Papa's soul in his clutches, was insupportable.

My mouth was dry and my hands clammy as I took up the mug . . . but I had to know whether a soul for a soul was an acceptable bargain. I spoke suddenly and hoarsely to my aunt, and of an instant she was beside me, holding me close and searching my ravished heart. The storm broke over us and the lightning flashed and as she held me thus my goblet of death's wine lay staining the heather.

When the clouds lifted and the rain ceased, she drew me up beside her and with a gesture that encompassed the hills and the valleys and the retreating storm she said softly, "Look, little one, the devil has disgorged your papa's soul. It will return to him in due course so be patient, ma chère, for never again will he lose it."

My aunt took my hand and together we walked down the hill. The next day she was gone and it was a long while before she returned. By that time my gentle mamma smiled again and Papa's laughter rang out once more.

As time went by my beautiful Aunt Adelia was not forgotten. Her debts were prodigious and the scandals surrounding her likewise. Papa spent a good deal of his life and income setting things to rights for her. When news of an impending second marriage came, Mamma expressed her vast relief, but Papa laid a wager on the duration of the potential bridegroom's fortune. He lost heavily as the wretched man shot himself within a month and there was no jesting for some time. But a few months later

there arrived for me from Rome a pair of wicked red stays, which gift so incensed my Aunt Agatha that she took up the fire tongs and committed the offending garment to the flames before I could display it. The last gift—a year later—was a single opal, and of it Aunt Adelia wrote, *When your soul is chilled, little one, look into its fiery depths for warmth: should fever scorch you, find respite in its cool green shafts: and if the perplexities of life overwhelm you, find solace and oblivion in its cloudy mists.*

When the news of my aunt's death reached us, one bright spring morning, I caught Papa's momentary unguarded look of shock and anguish, and I went out into the garden and sat beneath the great oak. The details had been brief. The ship in which she was voyaging had, one dark night, been lost off the coast of Corsica. A blinding flash of light had been observed from the shore followed by a muffled explosion, but as all aboard perished, the cause was never determined. I looked across to the far off hill where she had made her own sacrificial offering. As I turned, a tear, impaled for a brief moment on an eyelash, was caught in a shaft of sunlight and turned miraculously into a prism reflecting a thousand sparkling lights. I gasped with delight.

Oh, my beautiful Aunt Adelia with her spells and her witchcraft. Was there really a mystery about her departing? Had not the devil claimed his own at last? That is how I like to think it was and is. I see her now, riding the eternal night skies, her raven hair streaming in the moonlight, her loveliness clothed in stardust, and beside her that prince of darkness to whom she had given her soul . . . and is it perchance that consolation lies in that curious resemblance he bears to my handsome black-eyed papa, whose secret I now hold locked in my heart for ever?

© Hazel Ward 1963

WHITE AIR

White air half dews and sallows
You lit there at All Hallows.
In the whirlwind of white air
You rode the wild Night-Mare
Till she was hag-ridden and mild
As any christened child.
Beldame, I loved you then
More than those hallowed men,
And love you now again
The air is white with sallows
Between us and All Hallows.

ROBERT NYE

LADY'S MAID

Cecile gave him a world-weary smile.
"You do not know?" she said

BY GARSON KANIN

"CECILE sure in hell can pack," said Dr. Richter.

"Yes," said his wife, Miss Bliss, "and that's about all."

"Oh? I think she's good."

"You wouldn't know," she snapped on a note which brought this part of their morning conversation to an unmistakable end. He stepped out of the room as he continued to dress.

She was sitting up in their enormous bed surrounded by a scatter of morning mail, a stack of fan photographs (some signed), a wicker breakfast service, the morning newspapers, film notices, a small radio, three books, four manuscripts, a portable television set, a make-up tray, a huge box of yellow roses, eight bottles of pills, two telephones (one pink, one white), and three miniature poodles (all brown). With a white leather-bound manuscript on her lap, and scarlet-framed eyeglasses on her perfect nose, she was automatically learning her lines, moving a covering envelope slowly down the page.

"You like this tie?" asked Dr. Richter, coming back in. "It's brand new."

"Gorgeous. What's another word for wonderful?" she replied, without taking her eyes from the page.

"Let me think."

"Every two minutes he's got me saying wonderful, this meat-head. I ought to buy him a thesaurus."

"Why don't you?"

"He doesn't deserve it. What he deserves is a good clout or this whole blob of mimeoed garbage down his throat."

Dr. Richter left quietly, tying his tie.

"Thank you!" she shouted sharply.

He reappeared. "What?"

"Thank you," she said with dripping sarcasm, "for another word for wonderful. You're such a help."

Studying her anger, it crossed his mind that her off-screen acting was infinitely superior to her on-screen variety. Even without make-up or lights, her representation of sarcasm here

and now had an edge. His musings were interrupted as she said, "This year, was what I had in mind."

"Another word for wonderful," he said soothingly. "How about marvellous?"

"No."

"Splendid."

"No."

"Divine?"

"No."

"Superb."

"No."

"Elegant."

"No."

"Grand?"

"No."

"Capital?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Well, I was thinking—"

"Just go away, why don't you?"

"Could you give me the sense of it, darling? That might help."

"It's in the beach scene. The one we shot yesterday. Where he says, 'How's for a swim?' and I say, according to this—for the nine thousandth time—'Wonderful.'"

"How about not saying anything? Just sort of nod?"

She took off her glasses and looked at him.

"Sometimes," she said seriously, "you're simply pitiful."

"How about, 'No thanks, I can't swim'?"

He turned and started out, obviously tired of the game. She flung the script at him, missing by two feet. He retrieved it and brought it back to her.

"What a revolting tie," she said.

"You think so? My wife just said she thought it was gorgeous. That was the very word she used, 'gorgeous.'"

"Gorgeous!" she exclaimed. "I could say 'gorgeous.'"

"You did."

"I mean in the scene. He says—wait a minute—" She put on her glasses, found the place in the manuscript, and read. "'How's for a swim?' And I say, 'Wonderful.' Except I'll change it to, 'Gorgeous.'"

"'How's for a swim?'" he mumbled. "What the hell language is this character supposed to be speaking?"

"English, of course."

"'How's for a swim?'" he repeated in amazement. "That's English?"

"Yes!" she said, blazing. "Does that surprise you?"

"Nothing surprises me any more."

"All right, then," she said, "get going. I thought you had a plane to catch."

He started out.

"'How's for a swim?'" he repeated, adding a snort. "I hope they're planning subtitles for this epic."

She flung the script again, this time catching him neatly on the back of his head. He retrieved and returned the script, handed it over, said, "Funny how you can't seem to connect lately," and started to leave.

"Wait," she said. "See if I know this."

"I'm not sure I have time, dear. The plane leaves at eleven forty so I should be there by—"

"From the top of forty-three," she interrupted.

Dr. Richter watched her put her eyes into her palm, as though in prayer. He looked at the script in his hands.

"'—the bitter end,'" he read.

"'Of course it is you don't need to remindmeofit,'" she rattled, "'but I enjoy endings bitterorsweet I know it's perverse of me but I always have enjoyed them far more than beginnings I thrive on endings to me there's something wonderful about them'—there's another damned 'wonderful' again! I'll say 'magical'—'to me there's something *magical* about them'—much better—'magical about them I remember as a child loving the end of games orofaday orofameal orofasong.'"

"'—of your generation,'" mumbled Dr. Richter.

"'Do you think so?'"

"'—can be more.'"

"'For heaven's sake don't preach André I hatethatworldof yours made of words it's what we dothatmatters and not whatwe-say not any of us.' Is this where he has the long blah, blah, blah?"

"Quite long," said Dr. Richter, turning the page.

There was a knock at the door. She stared in its direction furiously. The knock was repeated.

"Yes?" asked Dr. Richter.

The door was opened and Cecile, Miss Bliss' maid, edged into the room.

"For the tray, madame?" she whispered tentatively.

The dogs leapt from the bed and ran to Cecile, jumping gaily about her. Miss Bliss exploded.

"How," she shouted, "am I supposed to get any bloody work done with everybody charging in and out like a bus station!"

Cecile went pale.

"I knocked, madame. I thought I heard—"

"You didn't hear anything! I've told you a hundred times, a thousand, a million—"

"*I* said come in," said Dr. Richter.

"No, you didn't!"

"Well, maybe not in those words."

Cecile moved nervously to the bed, and reached for the breakfast tray.

"Get out of here!" screamed Miss Bliss. "Get out and stay out and do as you're told!"

Cecile ran from the room, and tripped before closing the door.

Dr. Richter's face shone with sweat.

Miss Bliss resumed her pose and continued calmly, "'Of course it is you don't need to remind meofit but I enjoy endings bitterorsweet—'"

"Honey—" he said. He dropped the script on the bed and started out.

"Come back here!" she ordered.

In reply, he closed the connecting door, firmly.

A few minutes later, Dr. Richter was on his way. He swung his suitcase into his car and hesitated for a moment. He glanced at his watch, made a swift decision and re-entered the house. In the kitchen he found Cecile having coffee.

"I'm sorry, Cecile," he said. "And I know that *she's* sorry about it, too."

"Thank you."

"But some people find it hard to explain—to apologise—so let me apologise for her."

"I don't think so, m'sieur."

"What?"

"She does not apologise."

"But she wishes she could. We can't think of her—when she's working—as another human being. She's more like an exposed nerve. I know her, Cecile, and none of these outbursts mean a thing."

"No," said Cecile, "I cannot continue. It is too shocking for me."

He glanced at his watch again.

"Do *this*, Cecile, will you? Stay until I get back, anyway?"

"When?"

"Four or five days," he replied. He put his hand on her shoulder. "I'll make it up to you, Cecile."

"It is not that, m'sieur. It is very generous to me here. Only the treatment. I am not young, Doctor, isn't it?"

"Do it for me," he urged, "as a favour. She needs you. So do I."

"Very well, m'sieur," she sighed. "I shall try the best..."

The consultation in Texas was extended. Dr. Richter stayed on, keeping in daily touch with his home and it was ten days before he returned to California.

He reached the Los Angeles airport about noon and decided impulsively to join his wife for lunch. He went straight to her bungalow at the studio. Before he had waited five minutes she arrived, followed by her considerable entourage. She gasped as she saw him, said, "Everybody out!" slammed the door shut, locked it, rushed at him, and embraced him with such force that they both fell on to the daybed.

"Oh, I thought you would never, would never—" she moaned, hugging him. "*Oh*, you louse! If you ever go away again I swear I'll—" She kissed him suffocatingly, rose, and threw off her dressing-gown. "How's for a swim?" she said.

He laughed as he rose and took her in his arms.

"Honestly," he admonished.

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently. "We're married, aren't we? I seem to remember a ceremony of some kind."

"What about that time-and-place-for-everything idea?"

"Never heard of it."

"I would like to say, clinically, that you're behaving extra peculiar for a working girl in her lunch hour."

"I love you," she said to his neck.

"And I you," he replied, "but you certainly get some impractical notions."

"All right," she said, surrendering, "no swim. Stay and have lunch with me?"

"What I came for."

"Oh? Is that what you came for?"

"I hear the cooking is—may I use the word?—'wonderful.'"

"Probably diety gonk today—known you were coming I'd 've had Cecile *do* something."

"How is she?" he asked easily.

"Who?"

"Cecile."

"How do you mean, how is she?"

"Everything all right?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Just asked. How's the picture?"

"Creeping. We're five days behind."

"You ought to try to enjoy it more."

"Did you ever *try* to enjoy anything?"

"I enjoyed this operation I've just done. Wait'll I tell you. Fantastic."

"You enjoyed it because you enjoy operating. You don't *try* to enjoy it. There's a difference, Goofy."

"Well, if you don't enjoy acting, stop it. What the hell, nobody beats you with a stick to be an actress."

She studied him.

"Sometimes I wonder," she said. "You *look* intelligent. That's what fools me. You *look*—"

A knock at the door interrupted her.

"Come in," she called happily.

Cecile came in from the dining-room.

"Luncheon is—" She stopped as she saw the doctor.

He noticed at once a flesh-coloured plaster on her right temple.

"M'sieur!" she exclaimed as she came to him and offered her hand.

"Nice to see you, Cecile."

"Oh, m'sieur. Welcome."

"The great reunion," said Miss Bliss. "I'm touched." She started for the dining-room.

As they followed her, Cecile and the doctor exchanged a look. He inquired silently about the plaster on her head. She shook her head tightly and went out to the kitchen.

Cecile laid a place for the doctor. He and his wife held hands as lunch began. Cecile served the first course, supreme of grapefruit. Miss Bliss looked at her portion as Cecile started out.

"Wait a minute, Cecile," she said.

Cecile stopped. "Madame?"

"Is this your idea of pink grapefruit?"

"No, madame, but—"

"Never mind 'but.' Is this your idea of pink grapefruit?"

"No, madame."

"All right, that's all."

"I went to the—"

"That's all, I said. I don't want the story of your life."

Cecile left.

Miss Bliss looked tenderly at her husband and spoke in a new voice. "Oh, how I missed you! To the point of sick."

"You ought to see a doctor," he said.

So began a gay lunch.

"There's a Miss Lemaitre outside," said Dr. Richter's nurse. "No appointment but she says you'll see her."

"Certainly."

Cecile was shown in.

"What's that on your forehead?"

"Something thrown." She shrugged and shook her head and sighed all at once. Dr. Richter could not help smiling at the Frenchness of the gesture. "I cannot sleep and I do wrong. I do very much each day wrong."

"Not at all."

"I am frightened each day is why I do stupid things and make errors. I wish now to leave, when the picture is finishing, but I worry to say it to Madame so I say it to you *for* her."

"Wait, Cecile—"

"Also," she continued as though her speech had been rehearsed, "it is necessary that you find someone else for my place, yes?"

"You don't have to leave, Cecile."

"Oh yes!" she replied with vibrant finality.

Dr. Richter rose from his desk, moved to his refrigerator, took out a jug of orange juice, poured two glasses, and brought one to Cecile.

"Thank you."

"You know what it's like when she's on a picture. Don't take it so seriously."

"I am a serious woman and—" she stopped as her throat contracted. She struggled to hold back tears.

"Cecile. Would you let medicine have a chance?"

She looked up. "M'sieur?"

"Why don't I see if there isn't something I can give her? To keep her on a more even keel—calm her down."

"I should be calmed too."

"By all means." He opened a desk drawer and rooted around among the samples. Selecting four, he put them into an envelope and handed it to Cecile saying, "Try one of these once in a while and let me see to the lady."

"You are good, m'sieur, but you are cruel. On the way to here I have said to myself—I have told over and over—do not change my mind and now—" She looked sadly at the envelope in her hand.

Dr. Richter returned to his desk and as he wrote out a cheque, said, "And here's something else. The best prescription I know. Get yourself a new hat and a new dress, shoes, gloves, stockings, the works. Step out with not an old stitch on anywhere and see if you don't feel better." He handed her a cheque for three hundred dollars.

She glanced at it and dropped it on his desk as though it were too hot to hold.

"Oh no!" she cried.

"Cecile, it would be a kindness."

He came round to her, picked up the cheque, folded it, and stuffed it into her glove. She laughed.

"I should have gone to a train, not to here," she said as he led her to the door . . .

It was not the last ruse he was to employ in the weeks to come. Through patience and discussion, invention, and pleading, Dr. Richter was able to keep the household intact. His most difficult problem was Cecile who, being in the closest contact with the mistress of the house, bore the brunt of temper and temperament. A considerable salary increase was offered, but proudly rejected. Later, calloused and made cynical by harsh treatment, Cecile accepted it. It was to be a secret sum paid to her by Dr. Richter personally and in cash, over and above her regular salary.

The picture and the marriage ended simultaneously.

The pattern of Miss Bliss' rows with her husband had jelled into a standard form. Her outburst, his answering tirade; her smouldering threats, his teasing insults; her collapse, his comforting; the mutual remorse and self-recrimination. The final row passed as usual through its early stages, but when his cue for comforting arrived, he found that he lacked the emotional energy. He left the house, spent the night in his surgery, where he took the first sleeping pill of his life, slept soundly, and awoke refreshed, determined to see his wife once more, ready to give if she would give, and if not, well, end it . . .

Dr. Richter waited outside the sound stage until the blinking, swinging red light signalled the end of shooting. He opened the door and stepped inside as a loud bell began clanging again. A voice boomed out over the amplification system.

"All right, here we go again fast. Hold those hammers, hold it quiet. Quiet! Quiet down! We're rolling!"

Dr. Richter tiptoed to the edge of a brilliantly lit oasis in the midst of the overwhelming machinery and stood watching his idealised wife play a scene of the airiest banter with her celebrated feather touch. She purred and cooed and trilled and sparkled. Her unique coloratura giggle was interspersed brilliantly. As he watched this vision, Dr. Richter could scarcely believe that beneath the silk and chiffon and nylon and lace and paint there existed the screaming harridan who had so recently driven him from his home.

The scene ended.

The director leapt from his chair shouting, "Yes! Yes!! Yes!!!" with religious fervour.

The lights went out one by one, the dismantling of the set

began and the camera was wheeled into a new position. In the centre of the set a conference was in progress. It involved Miss Bliss, her leading man, the director, and his staff. Cecile stepped to Miss Bliss' side, handed her a lighted cigarette and a silver mug of tea, and put a shawl round her shoulders. Miss Bliss whipped off the shawl and threw it to the floor. Cecile picked it up and took it into the portable dressing-room. A few minutes later the conference ended and Miss Bliss started away.

Her husband had taken a position in her path. As she approached him, he held out his arms slightly and half smiled.

She swung past him in a wide arc and spoke to the assistant director at her side. "I thought I said no visitors on the set."

She stepped into her dressing-room and closed the door. Dr. Richter knocked sharply, opened the door, and stepped in.

"Get out," said Miss Bliss.

A product of a well-conditioned reflex, Cecile was almost gone when Miss Bliss grabbed her and swung her back into the room, tearing her dress. "Not you," she rasped. She pointed at her husband. "Come on, my boy," she said, "out!"

Dr. Richter went pale and spoke with a dry, thick tongue. "Don't you think, Eve, that after nine years we owe each other five minutes?"

She looked at him squarely and said, "I don't owe you a damned thing."

"That may be—" he began.

"Out, I said!"

Dr. Richter's long look said it all. He turned and started out. Cecile moved to her mistress and with a classic handclasp of supplication said, "Madame, please. Please, madame."

Miss Bliss slapped her with such force that Cecile was knocked off balance and fell against the dressing-table. Dr. Richter was at her side in a moment, steadied her, and led her out of the room. He turned back to his wife.

"A certain amount of bad behaviour," he said, "is forgivable —I guess—for a certain amount of talent."

She snatched the flowers from a heavy cut-glass vase, threw them to the floor, picked up the vase, and emptied it. Dr. Richter continued walking calmly through the splash.

"But nobody has, nobody ever has had, nobody ever could have enough talent to justify your carrying-on."

She brandished the vase and seemed to be within seconds of flinging it.

"And if you throw that," he said quietly, "at me or at anybody else, I promise you it'll be some time before anybody'll be interested in photographing your face."

He came back into the room, passed close by her, picked up his hat, and left.

There were more attempts at reconciliation, none initiated by either of the principals. The first was made by her studio, and the last by their lawyer, Marty. All failed. Worse, each attempt at smoothing the situation succeeded only in adding bitterness. The ensuing arguments caused each of the adversaries to bring up new ammunition in the form of old memories. In the end, what lay between them seemed unsurmountable.

The settlement was complicated by the fact that so much of what they owned together was of tangible value: real estate and furniture, books and paintings, and collected treasures.

Suits and countersuits were entered and the case moved towards its place on the calendar.

Marty, the lawyer whose attempt at peacemaking had already cost him Miss Bliss as both client and friend, now represented only Dr. Richter.

"I don't know what she's got up her sleeve, Carl," he said during one of their final conferences. "You never know with these crazy dames."

"She's not crazy."

"I mean highly strung. And this new mastermind lawyer she's hooked herself up with! I've never dealt with such a stiff. I call him up. To compare notes. To bring some order out of chaos? He gives me that 'I'll see you in court' bit. I haven't heard that one since God knows when."

"So we'll see him in court."

"Don't get sore, Carl, but we have to go over some of this again."

"All right."

"The thing is, I'm no good to you if I haven't the facts and I mean all the facts. Don't let me get out there and be hit with a lot of wet surprises."

"Such as?"

"Got to be cause. Somebody must show cause. O.K. These things usually begin and end with Topic A. You ought to know. You're a doctor."

"We've been over this a hundred—"

"Carl, I've got to get a clue. For the last time, I promise you. You're sure there was never anything wrong in the youknow department?"

"I'm sure."

"You were never denied; she was never denied?"

"*We* were never denied."

"Don't kid around," said Marty, wiping his brow. "You'd be amazed how these things can go. One little thing or remark, maybe that you've long since forgotten. All of a sudden it's out of the hat and we're nailed."

"We had some scraps, sure, the same as everybody, but nothing. Nice quiet little private scrimmages."

"Private's important. Because none of this stuff is worth a damn without a corroborating witness. Otherwise she could say anything or you could. The private stuff, the hay department, that's something naturally there couldn't be any corroborating witnesses, but anything else—"

Dr. Richter looked out of the window. "Boy, what a breath I'm going to take when this is over."

"And you still won't let me call any of the servants?"

"Damn it, no, Marty!"

"But why?" argued Marty. "Why not?"

"Because I'm not going to parade a lot of paid—a lot of hired helps to snitch about what they saw through the keyhole. Now get off that."

"Mea culpa," said Marty, raising his hands in surrender.

"What else? I've got to get to the hospital."

"Did you ever strike her?"

"Of course not."

"Jokingly, playfully?"

"No."

"Did you ever—was there ever anything with anybody—?"

"No."

"Even casual, even—"

"Even nothing."

"Did you ever insult her or humiliate her or belittle her in the presence of others?"

"Never."

"Maybe drunk and don't remember?"

"She'd have told me."

"Ever any nights away without her knowing where?"

"Not a one."

"These rows. Any affect her so that she wasn't able to work?"

"I'm beginning to think they were *necessary* for her work."

"How?"

"I don't know. I don't understand Evie—that's my failure. But there was something about the old blood-boil that stimulated her creative juices or—no. I'm out of my depth."

Marty shuffled through his notes, and said, "Damned if I know what he thinks his case is."

"Well, we'll know on Monday."

"Yes," said Marty.

He did not trouble to hide his apprehension . . .

Dr. Richter had never known a nightmare until the day of the preliminary hearing. Questions. Microphones. Questions. Cameras. Underfoot, coils and lengths of wires. Questions and questions and always the admonishing look from Marty, and silence for a reply.

The opening stages of the case moved at a pace so swift as to be removed from reality. These were the standard openings. Looking at his wife sitting across the room, cool and composed and interested, he wondered how much of her present attitude was real. Heat and physical discomfort became his enemies, as did the sound of the human voice droning on and on. A few times he found himself fighting sleep; during one of these battles he felt his arm grasped suddenly, and heard Marty's voice saying, "What the hell is this?"

He came to suddenly, felt a rush of blood to his head, saw the room in seemingly intensified light, recognised a figure in the witness box.

There unmistakably before him, being sworn in as a witness for the plaintiff, was Cecile Lemaitre.

"What *is* that?" asked Marty.

"Our maid. *Her* maid."

"She O.K.?"

"Far as I know. She—"

"Wait a second," interrupted Marty, "let me hear this."

The questioning began.

"Will you state your full name, please?"

"Cecile Lemaitre."

"Where do you reside?"

"I am now in temporary Hollywood hotel. I am naturalised since 1947."

"Occupation?"

"Lady's maid. I am this lady's maid."

"Are you employed at present?"

"No, sir."

"How long have you been unemployed?"

"Since one and a half months."

"Are you acquainted with the plaintiff in this action, Miss Eve Bliss and the defendant in this action, her husband, Dr. Carl Richter?"

"Both of the two."

"What is, or was, your connection with them?"

"For ten months I am lady's maid to Miss Bliss."

"You lived in the Bliss household, or perhaps I should say the Richter household?"

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Richter leaned over and began to whisper something into his lawyer's ear. Marty shook him off impatiently. Dr. Richter found a piece of paper, took out his pen, and began scribbling notes which he passed one by one to Marty as the questioning continued.

"Would you describe your principal duties?"

"I call Madame, I see the kitchen sends her breakfast tray, I arrange for the bath, the clothes, and phone to the chauffeur; then together with Madame to the studio and arrange all the comforts, sometimes to cook or serve and some personal laundries and many, many things."

"Did your duties bring you into contact with Dr. Richter?"

"Oh yes."

"What did you do for him?"

"Whatever the Madame asks. Sometimes to press a suit, or two breakfast trays or telephonings."

"Your employment was informal. Somewhat personal and intimate?"

"Yes. So."

"Your room or rooms, were they near to the rooms occupied by Dr. Richter and Miss Bliss?"

"Across the courtyard."

"As near as that wall?"

"More near. It is a small courtyard."

"So that if someone was shouting in there you could hear it?"

"Oh yes."

"Did you ever hear shouting or angry voices?"

"Many times."

"Go on."

"The doctor shouting."

"And Miss Bliss? Did you ever hear her shouting?"

"Never."

Marty was staring at Dr. Richter who looked back at him thinking, Why am I smiling? The questioning continued.

"Did you ever see—answer carefully—ever personally see with your own eyes Miss Bliss struck by Dr. Richter?"

"Yes."

"More than once?"

"Many times."

Marty was on his feet.

"Objection!" he called. "Vague and misleading."

"Sustained," ruled the Judge.

The questioner continued. "Suppose we begin again. You did see Dr. Richter strike his wife?"

"I did."

"More than once?"

"More."

"A hundred times?"

"No."

"Fifty?"

"No."

"Ten?"

"More."

"Thirty?"

"Not so many."

"Twenty?"

"Yes, perhaps."

"So we may take it that he struck her on an average of at least twice a month while you worked there?"

Marty was on his feet again. "Objection!" he said.

Counsel continued, "Did you personally see Dr. Richter strike his wife, Miss Bliss, about twice a month while you were employed in their house?"

"I would not put it so, sir, not by month."

"But many times? Twenty or thirty?"

"Perhaps twenty."

"There were some months when he struck her *more* than once?"

Cecile dabbed at her upper lip with a tiny lace handkerchief.

"Yes, sir. Perhaps."

With the suddenness of a shot, Dr. Richter burst out laughing. The witness, Marty, the opposing counsel, the Judge, the jury, and the spectators looked at him. Even Miss Bliss gave him her attention for the first time.

The Judge was irritated. "Will you remind your client that he is in my court?"

Marty leaned close to Dr. Richter and whispered, "Cut it out, Carl. You're going to foul us up."

Dr. Richter rose. "I apologise, Your Honour."

"All right," replied the Judge, "let's get on with this."

The opposing counsel repeated, "There were some months when he struck her more than once?"

"Yes."

"Did he use his fist or his open hand?"

"Open hand."

"Never a fist?"

"Not to the face."

"He slapped her face but at other times pummelled her?"

"Pummelled?"

"Punched. You know—" He suited the action to the word, and offered helpfully, "La boxe?"

"Some time. Punched."

"Did she ever strike back?"

"No, sir."

"What *did* she do?"

"Cry."

Dr. Richter reached into his coat pocket, got out a pillbox, and took two pills. Marty noticed that he was trembling.

The opposing attorney pressed forward. "Did he ever bully her?"

"Oh!" replied Cecile, and executed a gesture which bespoke more than words could manage.

"Say yes or no, please."

"Yes."

"Were there times when, as a result, she was unable to work?"

"Yes."

"Listen carefully. Did you ever hear Dr. Richter *threaten* Miss Bliss?"

"Yes. The last day I have seen them. They have had a bad fight together, in the studio. Miss Bliss working, the doctor comes not expected and in the dressing-room—terrible!—and I have heard Dr. Richter say that he will change her face that no one will wish to photograph it more."

"You heard him say this?"

"Yes."

"That's all. Thank you."

The Judge spoke. "What about it, Counsel? You want this witness?"

"Yes, Your Honour," said Marty, rising wearily.

He picked up the notes which Dr. Richter had been scribbling throughout the testimony and approached the witness.

"Miss Lemaitre, is it true that, for part of your stay, in addition to your salary, you received one hundred dollars in cash each month from Dr. Richter?"

"True."

"Is it true that from time to time, five times to be exact, he gave you bonuses ranging from two hundred to five hundred?"

"Yes."

"Is it true that these sums were paid to keep you from leaving because of Miss Bliss' tantrums—usually directed against you?"

"*Not* true."

"Then why did he pay you these extra sums?"

"I do not know."

"No idea?"

"Maybe so I will not tell too much," answered Cecile craftily.

Too late, Marty saw the trap. He glanced back at Dr. Richter in panic. Dr. Richter shook his head ruefully, and shrugged. Marty permitted himself a-final blast. "In that case, would you agree that Dr. Richter didn't exactly buy a bargain?"

"Objection!"

"Sustained."

"That's all," said Marty.

Marty stepped to the bench as Cecile walked calmly from the stand.

"In the circumstances, Your Honour, would you consider a motion to adjourn to your chambers for fifteen minutes?"

"Sure, if you think we can settle it."

The court adjourned . . .

Marty stopped for a moment at Dr. Richter's side.

"Sorry, Carl," he said.

"What now?"

"I'll do the best I can, but she's got us by the ears."

"Don't worry, Marty. All of a sudden I don't care. Honest. I don't give a—"

"But *I* care. It's my profession."

Marty left. Dr. Richter scanned the room, looking for a friendly face. His eyes stopped at the sight of his wife studying the script on her lap, the inevitable envelope moving slowly down the page, her famous lips forming words. He picked up his hat, and left.

Outside, he took three breaths deeper than he had had for some time and emptied his lungs of the court-room. He started for his car, but stopped as he saw Cecile standing on the kerb-stone, ineffectually signalling for a taxi. He smiled. Cecile's chronic inability to get a taxi had been a family joke. He moved across the pavement and stood beside her.

"Give you a lift, Cecile?" he inquired.

She stepped away nervously and said, "No, thank you, m'sieur."

Dr. Richter lit a cigarette and moved round to face her.

"Give me a minute, Cecile," he said. "Just for the hell of it."

She pressed her lips together, tightly.

"It's over," he continued. "Everyone's satisfied, but I'm interested to know why you did it. No. Not interested. Astonished. How could you keep from choking on those lies?"

She regarded him proudly and raising her chin slightly, replied, "There are many kinds of truth, m'sieur."

"Sure. I've lied, too, all my life and will again but why, Cecile? Why did *you*? For *her*. And against *me*. You and I were friends."

Cecile looked him in the eye and smiled a world-weary smile. "You do not know?"

"No. Tell me."

"You seemed always to me, m'sieur, a good man—as men are—but I believe there must be something most bad about you, else why would you support such terrible conduct from *her*?"

Dr. Richter looked at her and smiled incredulously. "Is that what's called French logic?"

"As you wish, m'sieur," she said, as she turned and started away.

Dr. Richter fell into step beside her, finding it difficult to match her small, slow gait.

"You don't really believe that about me, Cecile? You've invented that to give yourself a reason."

"Perhaps," she said.

"Tell me, Cecile. I feel if I can't understand this, I'll never understand anything. Just looking at it as though we were three other people, I'd have to say I was always nice to you—yes, and generous and—"

She stopped and whirled on him. Her face was suddenly flushed. "I am not prostitute, m'sieur," she said, "I do not sell *or* my body *or* my loyalty."

"Your *loyalty*?"

Her mood changed abruptly as their eyes met. "Some things cannot be explained," she said. "It is necessary to understand nature. You are doctor. You know the body, not the spirit."

"Go ahead."

She touched his arm tenderly and something in her tone made him feel a fledgling.

"I cannot be on your side. Never. Because I am *woman*," she said.

They stood looking at each other as he waited for her to continue. When he realised that there was no more, he said slowly, "You certainly are."

She walked away. This time he let her go. He stood at the busy intersection of the street, studying the throng and the individuals who composed it. He saw them all in a new and curious juxtaposition. For a time he looked only at the men; then, for a longer time only at the women. Finally, feeling older, he went back to work.

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The Beginning and the Ending Tree

By DARRELL BATES

AT SIX O'CLOCK in the morning the decks were cool and long and clean and empty. In the saloons and in the corridors the small compact Indian seamen moved and polished and swept, sure and silent on bare brown feet, and purposeful, like ants. In the distance the islands began to take shape and substance as the ship moved in towards them.

One of the slatted doors along the deck swung outwards, and a man walked across the width of the deck to the rail and leaned on it, and watched.

"Which one is it?" he said to himself. "Which one?"

It mattered to Mark Henshaw which one it was. It mattered a great deal. He had come a long way. The world he knew was Tunbridge Wells, and a fortnight every summer in the Isle of Wight. It was the eight-seventeen to Cannon Street and artificial light and linoleum and cups of tea and invoices from half past nine to five. At weekends there was Marjorie, the girl in the house with the flowering cherry farther down the road . . . It seemed a long way and a long time ago. The harsh dry heat of Aden, and the harsh dry men, and those liquid sliding eyes behind the women's veils had disturbed him and made him feel on edge and taut and strained. The hothouse dampness of Mombasa . . . where he had walked away from the security of the hotel and the brick houses and the tarred roads, and ventured along a dusty track into a patch of green unordered land. Trees and bushes and roots and climbing things were twisted and intermingled in a rich competitive anarchy, profuse and fertile. The earth when he felt it with his hand was warm like the body of an animal, and the air had a dank, seminal smell . . . He had hurried back to the hotel and had a cold shower, and read a paperback on nuclear fission.

One of the Indian seamen was padding along the deck with a bucket and a sponge.

"Which island is Ventoux?" Mark asked him as he passed.

The seaman smiled and shook his head and went on.

Later one of the officers came along the deck and pointed out the island. "There it is. Over there."

It looked very small and green, and the slopes seemed to merge sharply with the sea.

"Have you ever been there?" Mark asked.

"No," said the man. "No, I haven't. I'd like to, though."

"Why?" Mark asked, pleased that someone else should want to go there, while he himself was so unsure.

"There are some strange trees there, they say. Trees that don't

EXCLUSIVE—HIS NEW SHORT NOVEL

grow anywhere else. I'd like to see them, though people say it's rather queer . . ."

Quickly, too quickly, Mark asked another question.

"Have you heard of a man who lives there, Major Henshaw?"

He saw at once that the man had heard of him. He could see it in the eyes and the quick compression of the mouth. But, No, he hadn't, the man said, and then turned on his heels . . .

I wonder if I'll recognise him, Mark thought, as he watched the launch making a furrow of white and green in the dark sea. He hadn't seen the Major for eleven years, when he himself had been seventeen, but in the months before he had left home Mark had often looked at the photograph in Aunt Hilda's room. The closely-clipped moustache, the short cut hair, the eyes and the nose and the tidy ears that were as much part of the uniform it seemed to Mark as the peaked hat with the badge of the Royal Engineers. Only the mouth, the long, lopsided mouth was different. If it hadn't been for his mouth, Aunt Hilda said once, he would have been a Colonel.

But there was no one in the launch that looked like the Major. Or in any of the other boats that came out to the ship anchored in the bay.

"Yes," the Customs men said when Mark asked. "We know the Major. But he doesn't live here." They pointed at the line of hills rising out of the sea twenty miles away. "He lives over there. On Ventoux."

"Yes," said Mark. "I know. I thought perhaps he might have come to meet me."

"He never comes over here," they said. "He hasn't been here for four years, or five." The Customs man added something in a language which sounded like French but which Mark couldn't understand. The other man laughed, and they turned to deal with another passenger.

It was dusk by the time Mark reached Ventoux. The people looked at him curiously when he stepped ashore from the ferry, but when he asked where the Major lived they smiled politely and pointed out the way.

"Yes, that is his house," another man said farther down the road. "In there."

A sandy track picked its way through the coconut trees. The house was made of boards and the roof, Mark saw, was thatch. It was a long low building with a clump of some scarlet exotic flowers growing by the door. Beyond it the sea lapped gently on the sand.

From where he was on the path Mark watched the lamp travel along the length of the building. It moved from the window at the end and grew faint and then gleamed again when it emerged from behind the wall to shine through another window like a revolving lighthouse beam. At last it came to the doorway and rested there. Mark could see the hand that held it, but nothing more.

"Ah, there you are!"

The voice was instantly familiar. Close-clipped like the

moustache, he remembered, and the hair. He couldn't see the face.

"Yes." Mark couldn't think what else to say. The silence between them grew like an evening shadow.

"Where is your luggage, boy?"

Oh, God, thought Mark. But even the clipped peremptory tone, and that "boy" was better than the silence.

"I left it at the pier. They said . . . you would send for it." Mark's voice trailed away.

"Yes. That's what they always say. These bloody wogs."

Suddenly the lamp that had been held high all the time as if to inspect a leak in some dark sewer was lowered and became an invitation, warm, welcoming. The Major held out his hand.

"It is nice to see you, Mark. Come in." The voice too was warm now and welcoming. "I'll lead the way. You must be tired. I expect you'd like a drink."

In the room at the end of the building, they sat in deckchairs of faded green-and-white stripes with a wickerwork table between them. On the table were some tins of beer and glasses, and a tall thin bottle marked "42%" in ink on a small paper label.

"And how's your mother?"

The room was very clean and tidy, Mark saw. There were sporting prints on the walls, and skeins of geese by Peter Scott, and ivory elephants on a shelf. The brass Benares trays gleamed with polish in the lamplight.

"And Hilda? Still the same as ever?"

Afterwards Mark tried to think what it was that was different about the Major. The voice was the same and the moustache, and he had worn the same spruce bow-tie that he remembered on the visit many years ago at Tunbridge Wells. The nose was the same, and the neutral eyes and the hair and the ears . . .

Mark lay and watched the moonlight on the sea, and listened to the dry rubbing of the palms as they moved in the breeze. Away in the distance a man laughed, and a dog barked. "I know what it is." Mark spoke to himself in a whisper. "I know what it is. His feet were bare."

The Major had two plots of land. One was a thin strip of sandy soil and coconut trees along the shore on the east of the island. It was here that he lived in the house made of boards and thatch. On the other side of the island he had a larger plot on the slope of the hill. There were bushes of cinnamon and rows of vanilla vines.

"I'm getting too old, my boy," he explained, "to go over there every day."

The island rose steeply from the flat piece of land where the house was and the hill was densely and richly green with growth.

"That's where you come in," he went on. "I want you to keep an eye on things. Unless you go there every single blessed day, things go to pot. The men just sit and do damn all."

"I thought," said Mark, "that you employed women, mostly . . ."

"Yes," said the Major, "I do. But you've got to watch them too."

The Major got up then and started to pace about the room. "You've got to watch them too. By God, you have. They get cheeky, or they steal—" the Major's voice was rising in tone—"and hide the bloody stuff, or sneak away into the bushes and sleep on their fat black bottoms with their legs apart like animals . . ." The voice was high and vibrant now, and the bare feet, as they moved on the polished boards, made a sound like sandpaper.

"Do they understand English?" Mark asked.

"Some of them. But you'll pick up the lingo soon enough. It's a sort of French."

The voice was back now to the usual level clipped tone. "I hope you'll like it here. You'll find it a bit quiet after London and Tunbridge Wells. You must go over to the main island every now and then, and see a bit of life, eh?"

"Do you go there much yourself?"

"No. Not often now. I've lots of things to do here, you know. Lots of things . . ." The Major was looking out of the window at the sea, and Mark saw that he was smiling. The long lopsided mouth was smiling, and for the moment he didn't look like a retired Indian Army Major at all.

"Good morning, master."

Mark hadn't heard anyone come into the room, and he was startled by the quiet voice in the doorway. The woman's teeth were very white against the shiny blackness of her skin.

"Ah, Marie, there you are."

The Major's voice was different when he spoke to the woman. Quieter and softer, the clipped staccato tone was gone. "This is Marie, Mark. She runs my house for me."

"How do you do?" said Mark. He got up and put out his hand.

The woman was surprised at the offered hand. She wiped her own hands on her skirt and then put them up to her face, the fingers spread over her mouth. Then she touched Mark's hand quickly and stepped away. She was a fat smiling woman, no longer young.

When Marie had cleared the table and disappeared through the door, the Major coughed. "I shouldn't shake hands with these people, if I were you. They don't expect it, and if you do they will lose respect for you."

Mark didn't say anything. What an old Blimp the Major was.

Later they went across to the plot of land on the other side of the island. They went by a narrow path that climbed in curves and twists up the slope, and on either side the trees and bushes were like a wall shutting off the light, and the sound of the sea. As they went higher the trees were larger, and the air cooler and the silence deeper.

Some of the trees Mark saw were very strange. There were palms a hundred and fifty feet or more in height with small tufted heads like mops. There were stunted rambling things in curious

separate sections that looked as if a child had made them out of modelling clay. There were trees with roots exposed above the ground so that they seemed to walk on stilts. They were unlike any trees he had ever seen before. They reminded him of pictures he had seen of what the earth had looked like a million years ago.

The Major didn't say anything about the trees and soon they were making their way down towards the other shore. They could hear the sound of the sea now, and see the sun again.

"Here we are!"

There was a man waiting for them by the cinnamon bushes. He had a pale brown skin, like coffee well filléd with milk, and a soft sing-song voice and a wide well-worn straw hat. "Good morning, Major."

"Good morning, Pierre."

They spoke in a kind of French. Mark could sense that he was being explained. They moved among the bushes as they talked, and the Major greeted the women working there. He used the same slow quiet voice that he had used to Marie that morning.

The women looked at Mark. They were mostly light-skinned he saw, with smooth brown faces and arms. The backs of their thighs, as they leaned into the bushes and plucked the leaves, were the same smooth brown. They followed him with their eyes, and Mark was disturbed by the appraisals and the whispers and the soft laughter that trailed behind him like a wake.

The Major spoke to each one and always the voice was the same, quiet and slow, and with a touch of old-fashioned courtesy, like a stage Edwardian squire.

"Well, there you are, my boy. I'll show you the vanilla some other day."

"Yes," said Mark.

"Now I must be getting back. I'll expect you for lunch at half past one."

Mark watched the Major walk away up the path. He felt very much alone, and lost and young. It was a long time before he spoke to anyone.

Mark Henshaw had been a thin, awkward, unconfident boy. Even now at twenty-eight, he knew that he was much the same. He still looked young and thin and awkward. He was conscious of it all the time. His father had died when he was sixteen and he had left school. He had gone to work in London, and had lived at home with his mother and with Aunt Hilda. Above all else he feared getting involved with people and events which made demands on him which he couldn't meet, where things might be expected of him which he couldn't do.

He saw a lot of Marjorie, and he often went to her home farther down the road where the flowering cherry was. She was cleverer than he was, and quicker. She talked freely about things like homosexuality and contraceptives, but she never made any demands upon his sex. That, when he thought about it, was one of

the chief reasons why he liked her so much. It would be all right of course one day. There was nothing wrong with him. It was just that he wasn't yet ready or experienced enough. Next year perhaps . . . He had said that every year.

He walked up to one of the women picking the cinnamon. She smiled, the teeth very white and the tongue very pink against the brown skin. She went on plucking in the bush, her fingers feeling the size and texture of the leaves and taking only the ones that were exactly right. Beside her the basket was nearly full.

"How many baskets do you fill each day?" He spoke in slow precise schoolboy French.

The woman put her hand over her mouth and laughed. After a moment Mark moved on to another bush.

"How much money—?" he started. He saw that the white cotton frock was torn at the waist and showed a small shadowed valley of light brown flesh. The rest of his sentence died in his throat.

"How much money—?" He tried again to ask what her earnings were in the day. He hadn't seen her face until she turned then and looked at him. The face was flat and smooth and wide, the bridge of the nose almost level with the eyes and cheeks, the nostrils broad and flared above outward-turning widely-parted lips.

Mark stared for a moment. There was no smile on the face, or in the empty sepia-coloured eyes that met his look. Mark lowered his eyes. Her body was supple and young, the breasts small and pointed under the cotton frock, and the hips narrow like a boy's. One of her legs he saw was much thinner than the other, spindly and shiny like a waterbird's.

"I'm sorry," he said in English. "Excuse me." He walked quickly away.

It had been very foggy he remembered at Cannon Street that day when the letter had come. The yellow fog seeped into the carriages, and the smell of it was still in his nostrils when he left the train at Tunbridge Wells.

"I've had a letter," his mother had said. She held it up for him to see. He saw at once from the brightly-patterned stamps that it was from the Major, but he knew that his mother wanted to make the thing a long-drawn-out drama and a mystery.

I could have killed it there and then I suppose, Mark thought to himself, as he stood now looking through the cinnamon bushes at the dark green sea. But he hadn't. And when at last his mother had told him of the Major's offer he had, to prolong the game, asked other questions.

"You're really interested, aren't you?" she had said.

"You ought to let him go," Aunt Hilda had added. "It's a wonderful chance."

And so somehow it had been settled, before he had balanced the ayes and the noes in his tentative inconclusive mind.

It's quite nice here, he wrote that evening to Marjorie, *but some of the things, of course, are rather strange.* He asked if the flowering cherry was doing well. *It would be nice to go to the cinema tonight*, he went on; *with you*, he added and then crossed it out. There had been no question of an engagement or a ring or anything like that. But she had promised to write to him.

Mark got up from the wooden table and went to the window and looked at the sea. He remembered how once in the cinema, lighting her cigarette, the back of his hand had brushed against her breast. It was in the summer and he could still remember the warmth of it, and the curve and the way it had moved under his touch. Mark shut his eyes to recapture the texture of the moment. But all he could see was the sea, and the leggy outward-bending palms. Surely the images, the dear familiar images, would come back to him . . .

Suddenly he opened his eyes. He wiped his hand across them to rub out the soiling vision of the tear in a crumpled cotton frock, and the shadowed valley of light brown flesh. " I wish to God I'd never come," he said. " I wish to God I'd never come."

It was on a Tuesday, oddly enough, that it happened. It was funny how so many of the remembered moments of Mark's life had happened on a Tuesday.

When at the end of the day's work he had counted the baskets of cinnamon and paid the women he had lit a cigarette. It was a reason for staying behind. He didn't want to walk back up the path until they had all gone. They would look up when he passed and laugh and say words that he couldn't understand. He walked to the edge of the Major's land where he could see the sea. It was just over a month since he had arrived.

There was a slab of rock there that sloped at a sharp angle into the sea. Some small boys were jumping from the rock and splashing in the water that looked cool and transparent and clean and clear. Mark hadn't been in the sea yet. Be careful, people had said, of sharks and barracuda and sea-urchins. But he could see the water here right to the sandy bottom. If it was all right for those boys who were so small and young, surely it would be safe enough for him.

He stubbed out his cigarette and ran down the slope. Suddenly he felt strangely free. His loneliness all at once was transformed into a sense of independence. He could do, he realised in a rush, what he wanted, when he wanted, and there was no one to question it. He had never felt like that before. Always it seemed to him as he ran down the slope, he had done things to a pattern. You couldn't escape from the pattern. You couldn't on a clear day just abandon the office, and walk in the fields instead. You couldn't . . .

The boys were naked, and Mark peeled off his clothes and ran down the slab of rock and dived. The water received him with a close, cool, clean embrace that was, in that first moment, he thought, the most vivid sensual pleasure he had ever known.

The boys shouted greetings to him. Now for the first time he heard the words properly, each one clear and comprehensible; and he replied—the phrases that up there in the cinnamon seemed always to die in his throat or on the dryness of his lips now coming easily.

He walked back afterwards up the twisting path. He knew he would be late for lunch and he didn't care. When he reached the sloping valley where the trees were, he left the path to walk among them and to stare up at the heavy phallic stamens of the male trees, and at the furred loin-like curves of the nuts set in the shaded secret places of the female trees.

"I'd like to know about them," he said to himself. "I'd like to know how they start, and how they grow and germinate. I'd like to know more about them than any other person in the world: 'You'd better ask that chap Henshaw,' people would say, 'he is the real expert . . .'"

"You're very late," the Major said.

"Sorry," said Mark cheerfully and without any noticeable regret.

The Major raised his eyes from the remnants of his food and looked at Mark for some time before he spoke. "You've been swimming, haven't you?"

Mark's mind had gone back to the trees, and the sea's embrace and he wasn't listening.

"Haven't you, boy?" The clipped voice was sharp and affected, like the bark of a small dog at a child whose fear it could smell.

Mark ran his hand through his wet hair.

"Yes. I swam on the other side."

"It's not safe. I've told you before."

"There were some boys there. It was quite all right."

"You shouldn't swim with the native boys. It's— What did you wear?"

Mark smiled. It was Tuesday today, and he had lost his awe of the Major, and his occasional fear.

"They were only boys," he said.

"You mustn't ever do that again. If you swim with native boys, and with nothing on, they will lose respect—" the Major's voice rose again in tone and pitch—"we shall all suffer. It will be the end of us."

When he had finished lunch Mark said he was going for a walk.

"All right," said the Major. "I'll expect you back for tea." The Major always had tea at half past five.

Mark walked along the strip of sand that sloped from the coconut trees to the water's edge. The sea was quiet and green, lukewarm in the shallow lagoon, but beyond the reef a hundred yards away it moved restlessly against the coral wall.

One of the things that disturbed him most was his reaction to the people of the island. He didn't like them. He didn't like the smell of their bodies, or their dark, crisp, crinkly tight-coiled hair,

or their dirty ragged working-clothes. And he knew he was afraid of them, of their impassive, scrutinising eyes, of the hard muscular limbs of the men, and the sex-charged movements and looks of the women. And yet, in London, he had been always on their side. He had smiled at the dark fāces in the underground to show that he understood.

The Major's attitude confused him. He had expected the Indian Army view . . . but it didn't match somehow with the quiet voice that the Major used when he talked to Marie or the respect that he showed to Pierre, or the old-fashioned courtesy with which he treated the women plucking the leaves of the cinnamon. He, Mark, was the one, he knew in his heart, who spoke harshly to them, who avoided contact, who felt so different and so superior.

Mark felt now in his pocket for a cigarette. He turned and walked back along the beach. He knew where he had left them on the table under the windowsill.

The house was very quiet in the hot windless afternoon. He took off his shoes so as not to disturb the Major and walked across the hot sand to the window of his room. He reached in and found the cigarettes, and turned and started to walk away.

It was then that he heard from the other room the sounds of what at first he thought was a casual lust. Curiosity held him there and prurience, to listen and imagine, until he realised at last that what he had heard, the whispers and the movements and the small cries and the gentle laughter added up to something that wasn't casual lust at all.

"The boy," he heard Marie say, "is lonely."

"He will be all right." The Major's voice was quiet and compassionate. "In a month or two he will be all right."

"He needs someone."

There was a long silence, and in the silence Mark tiptoed away.

"Would you take this to Mr. Lefaure for me?"

The Major gave Mark an envelope.

"They live about half a mile along the coast. It's a wooden bungalow, painted blue. The paint is pretty old, and the whole place is rather scruffy. He's French," the Major added, "comes of a good family, but lost his money in some scandal or other in Paris, came out here and married a local girl."

There were about a dozen planters on the island. The Major was the only Englishman. The others were French, or had French names. Mark had seen most of them. Few of them, he thought, were entirely white.

"It's what you would expect of these Froggies," the Major said. "They don't behave the way we do. You can't expect them to, of course, being French." The Major tugged at his bow-tie, and looked at the sporting prints on the wall of his room. He never seemed to notice the bare feet below the neat crease of his trousers. Mark had grown used to them too. It was only when the Major

spoke of the faults and the decadence of other men that Mark looked at them, and thought of the inconsistency.

"Don't hurry back. If they ask you for a drink I should stay."

Mark was being organised, he saw. He's trying to arrange some social life for me. Mark remembered the talk he had heard through the window a few days ago.

"Ah," said Monsieur Lefaure, when he had read the letter. "Certainly. Certainly. If I can find it . . ."

He spoke English with an uncompromising Frenchness of accent and intonation. He used the English words with care and distaste, like a zoologist handling an unloved, but necessary beast. He was a frail, scholarly-looking man with a drooping moustache and thin blue-veined hands.

"Céleste!" he called.

Madame was a large woman with a dark, sombre, handsome face. Her bosom and her arms and the lines and curves of her lower limbs looked like a suite of well-upholstered chairs. She was so much larger and stronger and more dominant than the man that Mark was surprised somehow that she had answered his peremptory call so quickly and so meekly.

Her husband spoke to her in the island dialect. She went out immediately and returned with a bottle of embrocation.

"Thank you," said Mark. "The Major will be very grateful."

"How long have you been here, on the island, monsieur?"

Madame asked the question quickly. She doesn't want me to go, Mark thought. Perhaps she too is lonely.

"Do you like it? Will you stay?" The questions followed one another like a string of ducklings on a pond. It was Lefaure who in the end asked if he would like a drink.

There was a rustle of cloth behind him, and the sound of an exclamation checked at the mouth.

"Pardon! We didn't know you had company."

The two girls were dressed alike in white blouses and gaily-patterned skirts. Even Mark, who knew little enough of women, could guess that they had just come from the dressing-table and the wardrobe, and that there was nothing accidental about their entry.

"My daughters, monsieur. This is Marie Thérèse, and this is Alouette."

Monsieur Lefaure picked up a book on astronomy and started to read. It was the mother to start with who asked the questions and gave the answers. Sometimes she turned to the girls, repeating Mark's answers like an interpreter at some small international conference.

"He says, Yes, he likes the sea. He says, No, he is not married. He says, Yes, he would like another drink."

When she spoke to Mark she involved both the daughters in her questions. "Alouette here would like to know, if one may ask, do gentlemen in England prefer the dark girls or the fair? Is that not so—ma p'tite?'"

Like most of her questions it was barbed, if not to catch a fish,

yet to show that she was, at heart, a serious angler. Marie Thérèse was a pale-skinned, plump, blowsy girl with corn-coloured hair. Alouette was small and slim, and dark. Her eyes were black, and her hair, and her skin the colour of an autumn leaf.

" In the winter they like dark girls," Mark said, feeling his way carefully through this new kind of chess, " and in the summer they prefer them fair. Because of the climate," he added, " which is very fickle."

Monsieur Lefaure looked up for a moment from his book. " Well said, young man. Well said."

The girls laughed. Madame Lefaure frowned. A serious question demanded a serious answer, especially if it concerned matrimony.

" Marie Thérèse wishes to ask," Madame continued, without this time turning her head towards either of her daughters, " whether the island pleases Monsieur and whether it disposes him to stay."

" I think," Mark replied, " the answer is yes."

" Ah," said Madame. " So? "

There were other questions too, delicately phrased, with points that penetrated without yet drawing blood. At the end of half an hour Madame Lefaure, apparently satisfied prima facie that Mark was uncommitted, healthy, heterosexual, and a potential heir to property, picked up some sewing and retired to a rocking-chair.

The girls edged their chairs and their skirts forward an inch or two.

" Would Monsieur care," they said in unison, " to play a game of cards? "

" I'm going to lunch there on Sunday," Mark said.

" I expect you'll get a good meal, if you like garlic and snails and frogs' legs, and things like that," the Major said. " Funny people they are. They eat well, and old Lefaure is always buying books, and yet he's only got one suit and their lavatory is awful. Got no sense of proportion, these chaps."

After lunch that Sunday, Mark and the two daughters played cards again. They played the same game as before. It was a very simple game, as far as the cards were concerned; but the game of talk and touch and temptation that went with it was more complicated.

Often they spoke together, as if their minds and mouths were linked. They were twins, they told him. Even when they spoke separately the questions seemed to be for both of them, and the answers too.

" Do you like our hands? " The fair-skinned fingers and the dark touched his own round the edges of the cards. " Do you like our wrists? "

All the time Madame sat in her rocking-chair. Her presence gave the game an added quality. It set limits, which was a relief to Mark, and so made him bolder than he would otherwise have

dared to be. Yet it made each impropriety and touch and glance seem like peaks scaled against adversity. Without the rocking-chair they would have been no more than grassy slopes and an easy climb.

Mark felt very much at ease. He went there the next Sunday too, and the next.

After three months on the island Mark could speak the language reasonably well. In this time too, he realised that it was he now and Pierre who ran the Major's land.

Mark spent less and less time at the Major's home. He took food with him, bread and some fruit, when he left in the mornings, and didn't return for lunch. He had become interested in the cinnamon and the vanilla vines, and every afternoon when he had paid the women he would swim. The girl with the thin, bird-like leg didn't come to work for several weeks, and when she returned Mark saw that the tear in her dress had been mended with thread.

Three or four times a week Mark went out in a boat with Pierre and fished. Often it was dark when they returned, and they would walk together along the path back to the other side of the island.

"The trees," Pierre said one night, "are unlike any other trees in the whole world."

"How so?" Mark asked. They had stopped for a moment in the silent valley. The moonlight made strange shadows on the ground, and some of the trees seemed to reach up and touch the bowl of the sky.

"They breed in a strange way," Pierre said.

"Once or twice in the year," he went on, "the male trees move and the females receive them."

"Have you seen this?" Mark asked.

"No. No one has. They will never move if anyone is there. But we all know it is true . . ."

Pierre, Mark knew, was a serious man.

"Couldn't we hide? I should like to see this thing."

"No," said Pierre flatly, "it is not possible. And if you did see it, if you saw a tree move, then a man would die."

That evening Mark did something he had never done before. He went to the door of the Major's room and knocked and went in.

The Major was sitting at his table. He spread his hands over the papers on the table protectively, and his face went white with anger. On the floor beside the table was a green box which Mark had not seen before.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry," said Mark. "I wanted to ask you something."

The Major stood up. He shut the lid of the green box with his foot. "Get out of here. Do you hear me? Get out of here. I'm busy. I won't be disturbed."

Later Mark heard a knock on his door. He was in bed but he got up and opened it. He knew that it would be the Major.

"Mark?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry about . . ."

"It doesn't matter."

"What was it you wanted to ask me?"

"I'd like, if you don't mind, to go and live on the other side of the island."

There was a small wooden house of two rooms in among the cinnamon. Mark had got the key from the Major, and he would go there and eat his food, and sometimes sleep on the floor in the heat of the afternoon.

"All right," said the Major. It was unexpected, said quickly and quietly like that. Mark had expected opposition.

Guilty of his easy victory, Mark felt the need to offer an explanation. "Some people are stealing the vanilla pods, I think. If I lived there I could keep an eye on it."

"Yes," said the Major. "I see."

Mark had felt for some time, even before he had heard Marie in the room that afternoon, that his presence impinged on the Major's privacy. He sensed that for other reasons too this privacy was an important thing. But the real reason for his wanting to go was that he wanted now a privacy of his own.

"You'll need someone to wash and cook for you."

"Yes," said Mark. "Pierre will find a boy for me."

The Major fiddled with the buttons of his shirt, and suddenly he looked up and smiled.

"Mark?"

"Yes." Mark wondered what was coming now.

"Would you like to know what I was doing? When you came in . . ."

Mark went with the Major back to his room. There was a bottle of colourless rum on the table, the bottle that was marked "42%." Mark had tasted it once and it had burnt his tongue. The Major he saw now was a little drunk. The only other things on the table were a ledger and a copy of the *Financial Times*. There was no sign of the green box.

"What I do," the Major explained, "at the beginning of every year is to invest three thousand pounds. Not a penny more, and not a penny less. It's a matter of principle."

Mark couldn't think what on earth he meant.

"I buy some of this, and some of that."

He opened a ledger. It was clearly set out. The date, the price, the number of shares, and in a column at the end the total.

"Here are my telegrams, see."

There was a telegram for every entry addressed to a well-known firm of stockbrokers in the City.

BUY 84 TOKAI AT 32/6, HENSHAW.

Mark had never known any telegrams to arrive at the house. Perhaps for secrecy, he thought, the Major sent and collected them himself at the small post office near the pier.

"I get the *Financial Times* every day, of course."

The mail came on an average once a month to the islands. Marjorie sent him papers every week, and Aunt Hilda sent him the local rag. They came in bundles, a month's issues at a time.

"Yes," said the Major, seeing the look on Mark's face. "I know what you mean. Well, to play fair I only open one every day.

"Then," he went on quickly, "I work out my profit and loss for the day. Some shares go up a bit, some down, and some stay the same."

"Do you sell stock during the year?" Mark asked.

"Oh yes. That's part of the—" He didn't finish the sentence.

In another part of the ledger was another set of entries, and there were the telegrams too. SELL RHOD. B. HILL AT 4/9.

"That way," the Major said, "I can't cheat.

"At the end of the year," he went on, "I work out the balances. Often I've been up by several hundred pounds. This year hasn't been very good so far."

"I'm sorry," said Mark.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. You see it's—" Again he didn't finish the sentence.

"On the first of January I start all over again."

"Start all over again?" Mark stared at the Major.

"Yes. I invest my three thousand pounds all over again."

The moonlight had crept into the room, and a palm cast a patterned shadow on the wall. Mark had drunk two glasses of the "42%." There was an air of absolute unreality in the room, and he felt now that he was part of it. To ask a rational question required a steep effort of will. "But what happens to the ones you bought? The stocks and—"

"I haven't got the money," the Major said quietly. "I haven't got a sou. It's all a game, you see."

The Major suddenly had dwindled to a thin, aged thing. He was like a piece of grey lichen on a wall, dry and curling at the edge.

"I'm going to bed now," he said. "I'm tired . . ."

Mark didn't say anything about the Major's shares when he wrote to Marjorie that night. He found this time that he had nothing to say. After a few lines he tore up the letter. It was several weeks before he wrote again.

The mailboat came to the islands once a month.

His mother wrote every week. For a few months there were four letters in every mail from Marjorie too. Gradually they grew less, and in the last bundle there had been none at all. He was in a way relieved. It eased his conscience. He felt more free . . .

One day, a week or so after he had gone to live in the house on the other side of the island, Mark spoke for the first time to the girl with the thin wasted leg. He had been going round the cinnamon, talking to the women as they plucked the leaves. He was more at ease with them now, because of the language, and he often saw the girl but he had never spoken to her.

He found her sitting on the ground. She got up quickly when she saw him and went on picking the leaves.

"Does your leg hurt you?" he asked.

"No." She didn't look at him.

"What is your name?" He knew it, as he knew the names of the others, but he wanted to hear her voice.

"Azanne, monsieur."

Mark couldn't think of anything more to say, but he didn't move away. He saw that the thread that had closed the tear had snapped. His hand, moving it seemed by itself, came up and lightly touched the few inches of light brown flesh.

The girl didn't move or turn her head. Mark withdrew his hand, and after a moment or two he walked away. When he was out of sight he lit a cigarette and drew the smoke deeply into his lungs. The muscles of his calves and thighs were trembling, and he thought for a moment that he was going to be sick.

The next day when he went round the cinnamon he thought that the tear would be closed again with thread. But it wasn't, he saw, and when he spoke to her her mouth moved in the quick shadow of a smile.

He went to see the Major every day, or almost every day. And every day it seemed to him now the Major aged a little.

"Mark," the Major said one evening. "Do you want to stay?"

Mark had asked himself the same question. And now he knew the answer. "Yes," he said. "I want to stay."

"I wanted to know," the Major said, "because I'd like to leave the land to you."

"Thank you. That's very kind of you." Mark had guessed that he might, but it had never been spoken of before.

"I wonder. Sometimes I wonder whether it isn't the unkindest thing that I could ever do."

"I want to stay," Mark said again.

"And be like me," the Major said, "and die like me, alone?"

"You're not going to die and you're not—" He stopped just in time.

"Yes. I am."

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

"It's all right for me," the Major said at last. "It's what I want. But not for you."

"I like being alone," Mark said.

There was a full moon that night, and a fitful wind. Walking back over the hilly path Mark stopped in the valley and looked at the trees. He leaned against a thick fibrous stem and watched them. The shadows moved with the wind, and the monstrous palms and brittle leaves creaked and strained and groaned, and he heard a sound like the echo of voices calling distantly.

Mark shivered and walked on. At the top of the path he met a party of men coming down. He greeted them, and they returned his greeting. Behind were some women, in vivid frocks of green

and blue and red. As he passed, the last of them turned and paused and looked at him, and then went on. It was only afterwards, when he was walking down the other slope that he realised that it had been Azanne.

He had gone back. But there was no one there. He was relieved in a way and glad. He couldn't think why he had gone back. He returned to his small house.

The next day he saw Azanne in the cinnamon, and again he spoke to her. This time when he touched her, she turned her face and looked at him. He started to withdraw his hand but as he did so he felt her body follow his hand in a slow outward curve. The skin of her thigh was polished and cool, and smooth like a surface of stone washed and smoothed by the sea.

" You were looking at the trees, they say." It was the first time she, of her own willing, had spoken to him.

" Yes," he said.

" Did they move? " she asked.

" No," he said. " No. They didn't move." Suddenly he withdrew his hand.

All that day, and half the night he felt the smoothness that had been against his hand, and that brief disturbing secret roughness. Early in the morning he went down and dived into the sea as if to wash off the image. But it still remained . . .

" I'd like to go to the main island," he told the Major next day. " I think I need a change." He hadn't left Ventoux since he had arrived.

" Be careful. All the girls are — "

" That's not what I'm going for," Mark said quickly. " I just want to see some new faces. And I want to get some books."

" How long will you be away? "

" About a week," Mark said, " if that's all right."

It's a curious place, he wrote to Marjorie that night from the place where he was staying on the main island. *It seems to twine itself around you like a bindweed. The feel of the tendrils is horrid really. You try to tear them away but they go on twining, and after a time you give up the struggle and just let yourself be enveloped . . .* He had never written like that before to Marjorie, and when he had read it over again he crumpled the letter and threw it on the floor.

He went out on to the verandah of his room at the small beach hotel and looked at the sea and, along the coast, at the outward bending palms and beyond at the distant silhouette of the island of Ventoux . . .

" You're back very quickly," the Major said.

" Yes," said Mark. It was only four days since he had gone. " I was worried about the vanilla, and the cinnamon."

" I know," said the Major unexpectedly. " That's why I don't go there any more."

The strange part about it was that it was true. He had worried about the leaves and the vines, and it was that as much as anything

that had sent him back. That, and the loss of his solitude. He had quickly tired of the new faces and the brittle, facile talk in the bar and the regular set meals in the hotel dining-room. He wanted to be alone again in his small board house among the cinnamon.

The Major has got older, Mark thought, while I've been away. Just in those few days, the skin seemed to have become thinner and drier over the bones of the face, and the hands looked more brittle.

"Don't you think you ought to go for a holiday?" he said. "I know enough now to keep things going."

"No. I thank you, but I don't want to go. Do you know," he went on, "I made a profit yesterday of a hundred and twenty pounds." The eyes were alive and eager now, and the long irregular mouth dominated the face.

"Oh, good!" Mark was really pleased.

"Yes, it was those copper shares mostly. They had a good day."

"Someone told me," Mark said, "that sisal was in short supply."

"Yes," said the Major. "I had heard that too. I think I'll send off a cable today."

The next day when Mark went round the cinnamon Azanne wasn't there. Or the next day, or the next.

"Thank God for that," Mark said to himself. "It's stupid to be upset by a tear in a piece of dirty cloth." He didn't really like the girl at all. There was something earthy and elemental about her. Her eyes were like the eyes of a household cat. Large and brown and wide under those jet black lashes, but expressionless and without compassion. The white cotton frock she wore for work was always dirty and crumpled, and her face and hands and feet were coated with a powdery dust as if she had woken unwashed from a sleep on the sand. "I'm glad," Mark said. "I hope she's gone for good."

It was very warm and sultry that afternoon after lunch. There had been a bouillabaisse, made by Madame Lefaure herself. Mark had brought a small octopus with him when he had arrived after a morning's expedition on the reef with Pierre, and some shellfish that he knew she liked when she made bouillabaisse.

"Thank you, monsieur," she had said. "You are too kind."

"They are for your birthday," Mark said. Marie Thérèse had told him about this the week before.

Madame Lefaure kissed him on both cheeks. "You are like a son to me." The first time she had done that he had felt embarrassed and blushed, but she always kissed him now when he arrived for lunch on Sundays and when he left. At first he had held himself away from her rich, wide, encompassing flesh and the disturbing tang of it that pricked his nostrils, making them dilate and flare. He had got used to it now, like the boúillabaisse. The first time too that had almost made him ill.

Monsieur Lefaure always went to sleep after lunch. There had

been more wine with the bouillabaisse and Madame nodded now and then over her sewing in the rocking-chair. The girls drew their chairs closer to the card table.

"Do you know what age we are?"

Alouette nestled her knee closer into Mark's thigh.

"We are fourteen."

Mark never knew unless he watched the movement of their lips which one had spoken. They both had the same light sing-song voice like pet budgerigars.

"You are only children then," Mark said, smiling, "too young for serious talk."

"For talk perhaps—" A hand touched him underneath the table. He didn't know whose hand. "But not for love—"

"Shush," said Mark. Turning, he saw that Madame's eyes were open. They were glazed but they were open.

"We are virgins. Both of us."

"What talk!" said Madame. The glaze had gone from her mouth: the fond, prideful smile such as he had seen on mothers in Tunbridge Wells.

"Which one of us will you marry?"

Mark thought it was the fair one who spoke, but he wasn't sure. A dozen feet away Madame's needles clicked happily together like the hind-legs of a mating grasshopper.

"You don't know, do you? You like both of us the same."

Mark's hand touched flesh, but he didn't know if it was dark or fair. With the other hand he dealt for the three of them.

"Yes," he said, "that's it."

The knitting needles paused for a moment, and then went on again. A little later they stopped again.

"You must not think of marriage—" Madame's voice was sleepy but determined—"until you are sixteen. It is not commil-faut." The phrase in the dialect was compressed into a single word. "By then Monsieur will have married someone else, or he will have left the island. Is that not so, monsieur?"

Underneath the table the secret warm hands were withdrawn to join the one fair hand and the one dark that held the cards openly on the tabletop.

"Will you go," Alouette asked, "or will you stay?"

"I do not know," Mark said, "but I think I will stay."

He felt the hands begin to move slowly towards him under the table, but there was no contact yet.

"And will you marry someone else?"

This question Mark sensed was not so serious. Marie Thérèse smiled when she spoke, and he smiled his reply.

"No. I will wait for you. And for your sister."

The two hands reached him at the same time. Neither hand recoiled when it met the other, and they touched and then interlaced and moved together.

"And then what will you do?"

"I will marry both of you."

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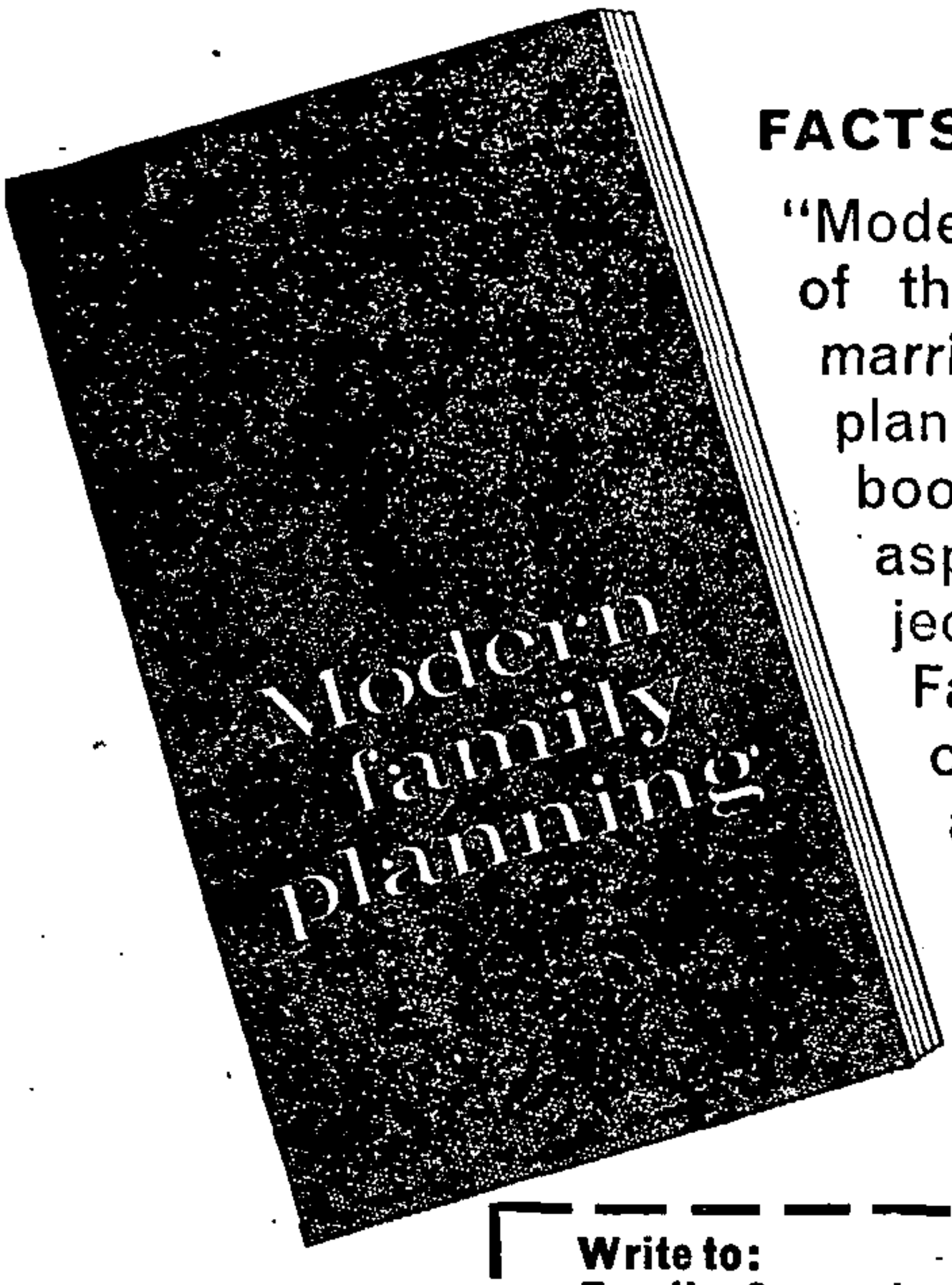

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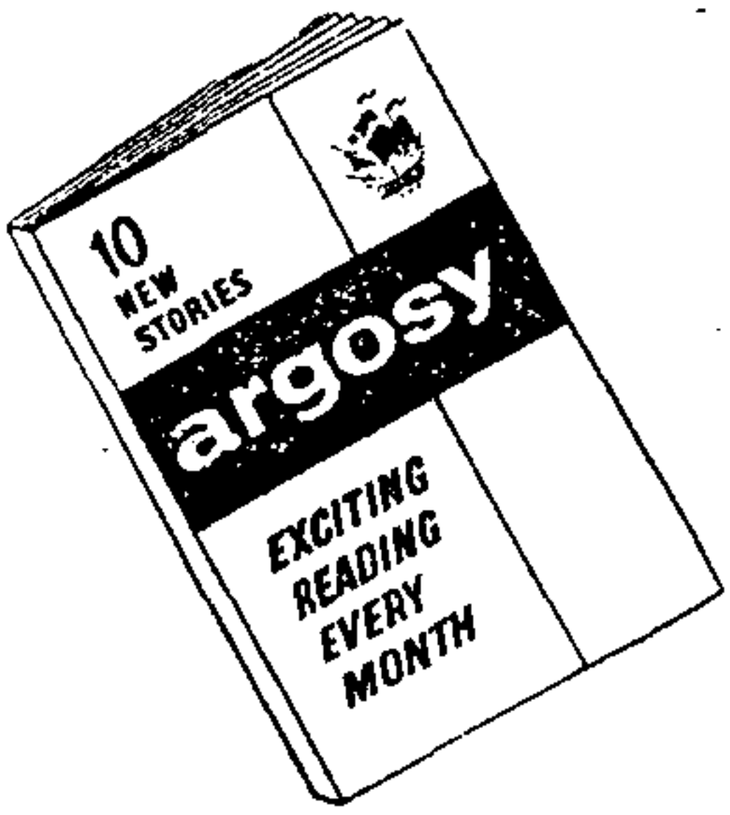

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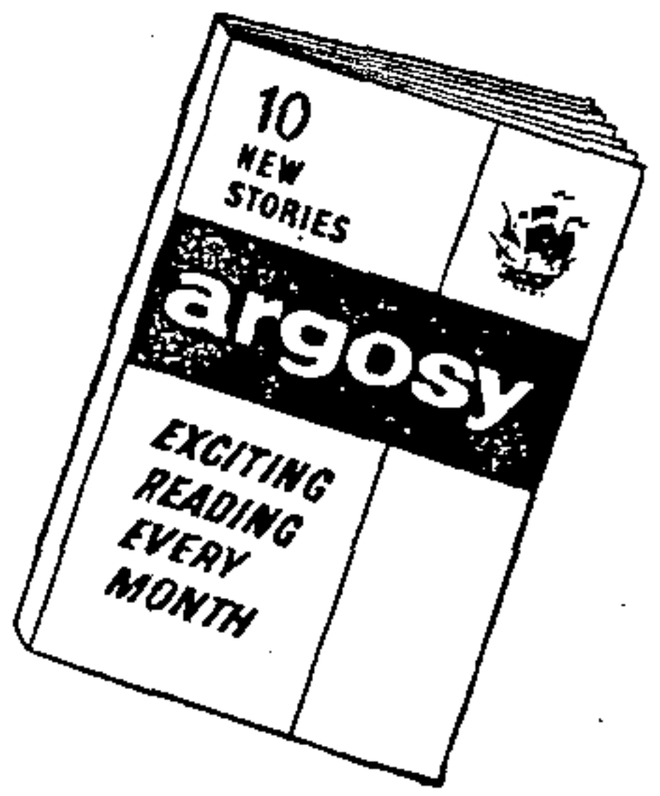

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The girls laughed. Madame Lefaure didn't laugh or smile. Marriage for mothers was a serious matter.

The needles clicked for a few minutes more, but the pace slowed and soon the needles were silent; Madame began to snore. The girls looked at their mother and at one another and then at Mark. They leaned slowly over the table towards him. He looked for a moment and then lowered his eyes. Two hands reached out together and settled lightly underneath his chin, and raised it, and his eyes.

"Feel our hearts," they whispered, "feel them now. Feel how they beat."

Mark shut his eyes. The flesh that had looked so hot and damp was cool and very smooth. "In two years," the whispers continued, "they will be . . ."

"Do not do that, mes enfants . . ." Madame's voice was very sleepy. Mark quickly drew his hands away and the colour started to rise on his neck and his ears. ". . . it might tear your dress."

This sort of contact, this sort of talk, was what Mark liked. It was exciting but it was safe. It only led to the future, and the future was a long way ahead. It was like a journey. It was at the end of the journey that one had to act. This was what Mark feared. He didn't know what to do at the end of the journey.

He had lost his shyness now, with Marie Thérèse and Alouette, but only because he knew that for the present it was only talk and touch. He was never alone with the girls.

If only, Mark thought, as he walked home that evening, sex was just talk and touch. The other thing ought to be locked and hidden away in another room. Marriage was the key they said to the door of this other room, and beyond that door, Mark used to feel, closed and locked again against the world, it would come to one naturally like swimming to a fish or flight to a bird.

To admit now at twenty-nine that he was scared and didn't know was something he couldn't do. To seek assurance or understanding was to expose his fear and his ignorance. So he went on waiting, putting it off, hoping that one day, somehow, it would be all right . . .

"It takes nine years and nine months and nine days," Pierre said, "from the time the female tree receives the pollen from the male before a nut is ripe and falls and starts another tree."

"Almost as if," Mark said, "they were ancestors of man."

"Yes. The trees are like humans in many ways. They cry, and bleed, and quarrel . . ."

They were walking together in the valley where the trees were. They were looking, at Mark's request, for the saplings and the young trees which they knew must exist but which somehow were always difficult to see.

"It is three times that period," Pierre went on, "twenty-seven years, and twenty-seven months and twenty-seven days before a new tree starts bearing fruit."

Pierre picked up a stone and threw it at one of the trees. "That is what they say . . ."

"Don't you believe it?" Mark suspected that the disbelief had been assumed for his benefit.

Pierre threw another stone. "No," he said, and spat and smiled. "It is just old people's tales."

Mark was doing some arithmetic. "How odd," he said to himself. He was twenty-nine now and three months and twenty-two days. Twenty-seven years and twenty-seven months and twenty-two days.

"Do you know," he asked Pierre, "how the trees got their name?"

Mark had read several books about the trees. He knew the Latin name, and the name that they had in the island dialect. It was the Beginning and the Ending Tree. There were several theories about the name and he wondered what Pierre would say.

But, No, he said, he didn't know, and turned his head away.

"Someone told me," Mark persisted, "that they are called by that name because they were the first trees ever to grow in the world, and that they will also be the last."

"Yes," said Pierre. "I have heard that."

"And that when they die, and none are left the world will end."

"Yes," said Pierre again. "And here in this valley is the only place in the world where they grow. Is that what the books say?"

"Yes," said Mark. "That is what the books say.

"You told me once," Mark went on, "that at night sometimes the male trees move and pollinate the females."

"So they say." Above them hung one of the heavy pendants that carried the pollen of the males.

"And that if one saw this thing, then a man would die?"

Pierre spat again. "It is time we went."

"I would very much like to see it," Mark went on. "Would you help me to see it, and come with me?"

"No," said Pierre. "It is no use asking me. The only ones who can help are the children—" he stopped and cupped his hand over his mouth, and then shrugged his shoulders—"the children of the trees."

It was an old custom, he explained, going back many many years that babies who were not wanted were taken into the valley at night and left at the foot of one of the female trees.

"Do you mean illegitimate babies and things like that?"

"No. I do not mean that. A woman would never give a child to the trees because of that."

"Then?"

"If a child were born deformed or if the top teeth came before the bottom teeth. Only then would it be given to the trees."

"Is that still done?" Mark asked.

"No. It is not done now. No one does it now."

"Did the children die," Mark asked, "when they were left to the trees?"

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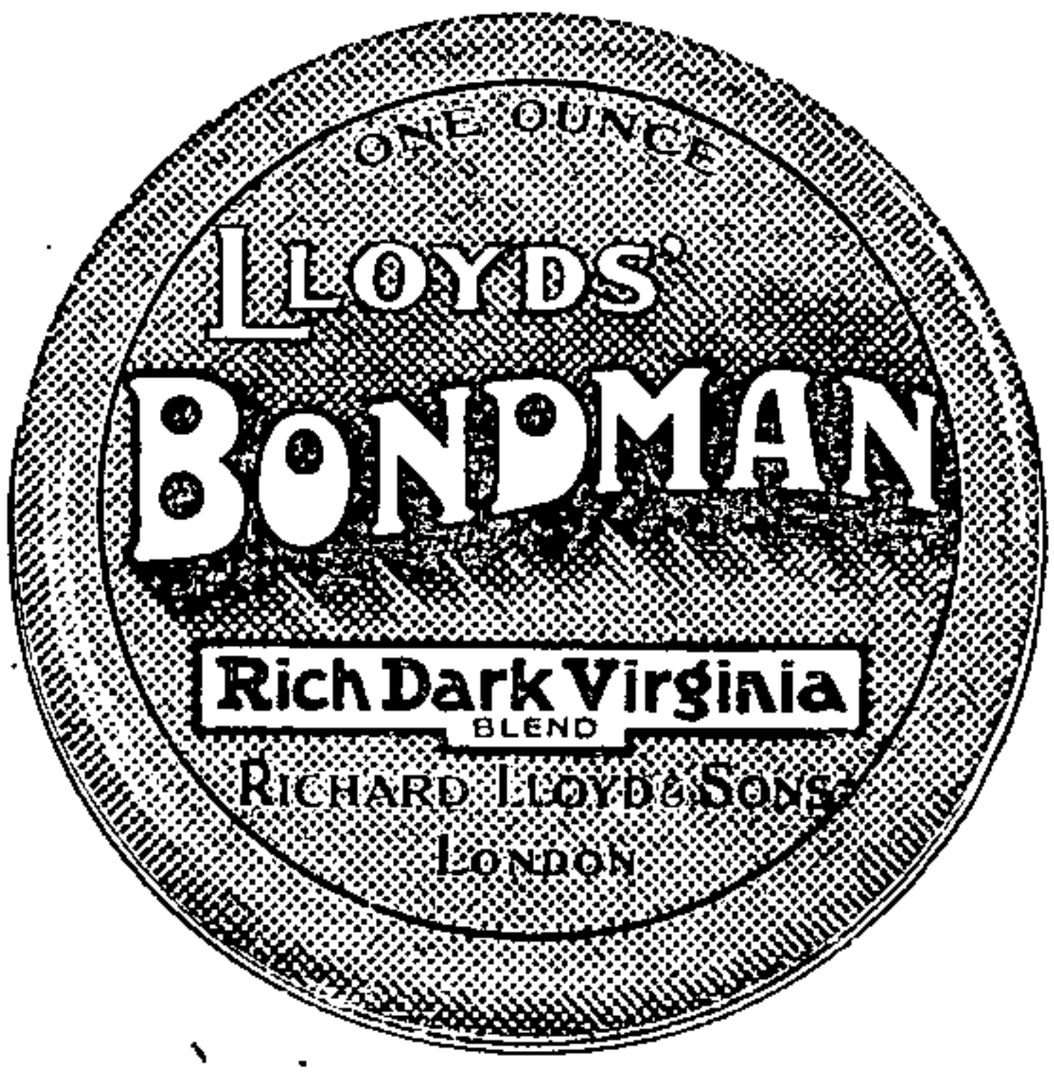

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"Sometimes," Pierre said, "and sometimes they lived. Women who were childless would sometimes take them and bring them up as their own."

"Are there any left now? Here on the island?"

"A few," Pierre said. "They are mostly very old."

"Mostly?"

"Yes. There are one or two that are young. There were some people, ignorant people, who still went on with the custom even though the Church said it was a sin. Even though the Government made it a crime and put the women who did it into gaol."

The trees fascinated Mark. He didn't know why. He felt that they held the secret of some ancient mystery; he felt too sometimes that the mystery belonged in a strange way to him.

The next day was a Tuesday. Mark still woke on a Tuesday with a sense of expectation. But it was a long time now since Tuesday had brought him anything. He had begun to wonder whether it had lost its singularity. Perhaps, he thought, I am growing old.

But this morning was different. He felt it as soon as he woke. The sky that in the early mornings was the colour of a starling's egg this time was a much darker, heavier blue. The sea was disturbed and green, and moved with urgency and restlessness against the reef. On the horizon in the east, dark clouds were massed like widows in a Spanish church.

"There's a hurricane about," Pierre said. "Somewhere away in the south."

"Will it reach here?"

"No. We don't get them here. But the effects sometimes are very strange." Pierre had an anxious look, and he spoke harshly to the women working in the cinnamon.

Azanne, Mark saw, was there. He didn't go near her when he did his rounds. It wasn't until the day's work was over and he was paying out the wages that he spoke to her: brief, formal words, as formally and as briefly returned. She bent her head over her hand when she took the money, and he thought from the movement of her lips that she was counting the coins. But she was framing words he realised in the end for him, and no one else, to hear. She said them over and over again, and then turned abruptly and went her way.

It was very hot that afternoon, without any breeze of air. The clouds were still dark on the horizon and now they had a yellow, sulphurous look. The men had pulled their boats up over the sand into the shelter of the trees, and the seabirds, the terns and the gulls and the boobies, were huddled in groups along the shore.

The Major was better, he thought, when he went there in the evening, and more cheerful.

"Yes," he said, "there will be a storm."

He was sitting up in bed when Mark arrived. His ledger and the *Financial Times* were on a table beside the bed, and in the

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doorway Marie hovered, waiting to carry and move and bring to save him any effort or delay. Underneath the bed he saw was the green box he had seen that day in the Major's room.

"I always buy before a storm," he said. "It sharpens my instinct."

He showed Mark a sheaf of telegrams. With them he had bought over a thousand pounds of stock.

"I would have bought some tin shares," Mark began.

"Don't tell me what to buy and what not to buy, boy." It was a long time since the Major had spoken to him like that.

Mark got up and went to the window.

"Will it rain," he asked, "do you think?"

The Major said, Yes, it would. Marie fluttered her hands by the door, disturbed by the sound of words, and sensing the disturbance in them.

Mark turned from the window and sat in the chair by the Major's bed.

"There was something I wanted to ask you . . ."

"Yes, Mark. What is it?" The Major's military voice had gone as quickly as it had come.

"Well," he said when Mark had finished. "Madame Lefaure came from a family on the main island. Her father was a Greek, but her mother was rather a mixture. A bit of Indian blood, I should say, and some Chinese too perhaps."

"What would happen if someone married one of the daughters?"

"Someone? A white man? Someone like you?"

"Yes," said Mark. "Someone like me. What would the children be like?"

"Black," said the Major in a harsh, hard voice. "Black or brown or yellow, or khaki, for all I know."

"Or white then?"

"It could be. Why are you asking me? Are you thinking of marrying one of them yourself?"

"I'm not thinking of marrying anyone," Mark said. "I don't think I'm the marrying kind."

"That's what I thought—" the Major took a sip of rum—"when I was your age."

"But you never married."

The Major finished off the glass. "No," he said. "I never did."

It had started to rain.

"Why don't you stay to supper?" the Major said.

It rained all through the meal. The wind was rising, and outside the palms moved restlessly and creaked.

"I've noticed how you've changed," the Major said.

"Yes," said Mark. "I know."

"Don't lose your identity, though. Don't—"

"I want to lose it," Mark said. "There wasn't much to lose, was there, in any case?"

"You were my brother's son. Don't forget that. Don't ever forget that."

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Ready Now 12'6

In the doorway Marie stood, her face and her hair streaming with the rain. She spoke to the Major.

" Yes," he said, " you had better stay the night, Mark."

" I'm sorry. I'm afraid I must get back."

" You can't go out in this."

" I really must go. I've got some things to do."

Marie suddenly started speaking in a fast, high-pitched voice. She had come right into the room. She was no longer Marie the servant. She was the mistress of the house.

" He can't go. He must stay. The rain, and the storm and the lightning . . . He mustn't go."

" She's right, Mark," the Major said.

His face had suddenly gone white. " I've got to go."

" No! " said Marie. " No! No! No! "

Mark looked at her face, and at the Major sitting there in the bed stiff and set, the anger mounting to his eyes. He turned suddenly and ran from the room.

" Come back! Come back! "

Mark ran on. The rain was harder now, and gigantic streaks of lightning lit up the palms and the sand and the sea, as if for a moment it was the middle of the day.

When he reached the valley of the trees there was no one there. He stood panting, trying to regain his breath. The rain was in his hair and eyes and mouth, and his shirt clung to his body like a skin. The trees swayed in the gale, creaking with torment, and when the lightning came the wetness on the stems glistened and slid and oozed like blood from a wound.

" I must be crazy," Mark said aloud, " to have come." But he didn't move. He was there nearly half an hour before she came.

He didn't hear any sound and see any movement, but suddenly he knew she was behind him. He put out his hand and she took it and came and stood beside him.

" They will move. The trees will move tonight! " She said it over and over again, like an incantation. They were the same words as she had used in the afternoon.

" And if we see it," Mark said, " a man will die."

" Yes," she said. " A man will end, and—" her hand moved and touched him—" a man will begin."

" What do you mean? A man will begin? " Mark had not heard this variation before.

" " It is a saying." Azanne freed her other hand and put it on his shirt. " It is wet. And the wetness will get cold." She opened the buttons of his shirt and pulled it from his shoulders.

" Azanne? " he said. He had never said her name before. " How do you know the trees will move tonight? How do you know? "

" I know. I know because I am a child of the trees."

" Ah," he said. " I see."

" You know what it means? To be a child of the trees? "

" Yes," Mark said. " You are a child of the trees because of your leg."

"Yes," she said. "Because of that. A child of the Beginning and the Ending Tree."

Suddenly there was a harsh brushing sound, and then a pause, and then a crash. Mark knew it was a tree, but in the rain and the black darkness between the lightning he could see nothing and he couldn't tell how near it was. He felt the girl quivering beside him like a dog in fear.

When the lightning came she screamed.

"I saw it! I saw it!"

She clung to Mark now, her arms clawing at his back. She was wet and slippery, and cold, and he tried to push her away, his hands against her shoulders. He didn't know if it was her movement or his that brought his hands down to the small pointed breasts and ripped the sodden cloth.

"I saw it! I saw it!"

In the next flash of lightning Mark saw it too. He followed the direction of the girl's eyes and turned his head and saw the male palm angled from its broken stem and buried deep in the foliage of the thick female tree.

"Now!" said the girl. "Now! You must! You must! You must!"

It seemed a long time before Mark felt the rain again, and heard the wind and the noise of the creaking twisted trees. The rain seemed to have eased, and the wind was quieter.

He got to his feet and picked up his shirt, and the girl's torn and crumpled dress. He put out his hands and pulled the girl up from the ground.

"Put on your dress," he said.

"Yes, master."

They walked to the path. The moon was beginning to show through the racing clouds.

"Shall I come to your house now?"

"Yes." He noticed the "master" and the "now." He smiled to himself. He felt larger and older and stronger and he walked on ahead until he was clear of the trees and could see the sea. The moon touched the white crests of the sea and made them look like the tossing manes of a herd of horses galloping.

Marie wouldn't look at him when he went to the Major's house the following day. She didn't greet him, or reply when he asked how the Major was. Her eyes showed a lot of white.

The Major's eyes were open when Mark went into the room, but there was no sight in them. The hands lay palm upwards on the sheet, there were beads of sweat, like frosting on a bottle, on the thin column of neck.

The lips moved when Mark sat down on the chair beside the bed, but he couldn't hear what the Major said. He leaned closer, putting his ear closer to the moving lips. It was then, for the first time in his life, that Mark smelt the strange elemental smell of death.

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" Is it you, Mark? "

One of the hands fluttered feebly like the wing of a shot bird. Mark dipped his finger in a glass and wetted the dry lips. They had no strength to absorb the moisture, and after a moment or two it ran down on to the chin.

" Mark? "

" Yes. I can hear you. What is it? "

" That box." The Major shut his eyes to concentrate all his strength in his tongue and his lips. " That green box."

" Yes. I know the one."

" Burn it. Don't open—burn—"

It was some time before the Major spoke again.

" Did you hear—about the box? "

" Yes. I heard. I will burn it, and I won't open it."

" Ah." The lines of pain and fear flowed away from the face, and for a moment or two it was smooth and peaceful and quiet. Then the lines and the strains gathered again into tight knots of nerve and skin, and the lips moved once more.

" Marie—give her something."

But Mark knew that the Major didn't hear his promise.

Mark shut the eyes, and folded the hands. He closed the windows and walked to the door. From the corridor, huddled against the wall, Marie watched him with staring hostile eyes.

There was accusation in them as well as fear. As if she knew . . .

After the burial next morning, in a small sandy patch of land shadowed by a clump of mango trees, Mark walked back to the house alone. He had stood with the Lefaures at the funeral. He had promised to go that day for lunch.

" I am going now."

Marie was standing in the doorway of the kitchen. She had a blanket rolled under one arm, and the other held a small canvas bag.

" Wait, Marie," Mark said. " I want to talk to you."

" No." The harsh bleak negative was like a blow in the face. Mark looked down at his feet, avoiding the accusing eyes.

" Would you like this house, Marie? You can have it if you wish."

" No."

" The other is enough for me."

She shook her head, and started to walk away.

" I will send you money then."

He watched her walk away towards the pier. A boat was waiting there. She climbed aboard and went to the prow and sat there looking outwards and away towards the sea.

Mark burnt the box later in the morning. He dowsed it with paraffin and left it to burn. He had to use a stick afterwards to separate the sheets of paper and give them space and air to burn. He couldn't avoid seeing the sheets of manuscript and the pages of print. He made ready to shut his eyes against the Major's secrets,

the naked figures, he imagined, the whips and postures and the cheap crowded print of books published quietly in Marseilles and Berlin. But the shock of what he saw held his eyes open against his will. The pages of verse in the Major's neat hand, and the volumes of Keats and Tennyson and Yeats curled in the new flames. Mark shut his eyes quickly and only opened them when he felt the healing heat of the sheet of flame that hid for ever the shameful secret of a Major in the Royal Engineers.

That evening Mark sat at the table in the Major's room. He opened the ledger, and saw that the Major had totalled up the figures and balanced his profit and his loss. This Mark knew was something that the Major normally did only at the end of every year. The figures were in pencil, and the rough uncertain line below them was in pencil too.

Mark rubbed out the totals, and then the line. Slowly he put out his hand and took the top copy of the *Financial Times* from the pile on the table, and opened it.

BUY 250 LONDON TIN AT 14/6, he wrote on the telegram form. Then he took up the Major's pen and entered it in the book, in ink.

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From Darrell Bates' A Longing for Quails, to be published by Hart-Davis

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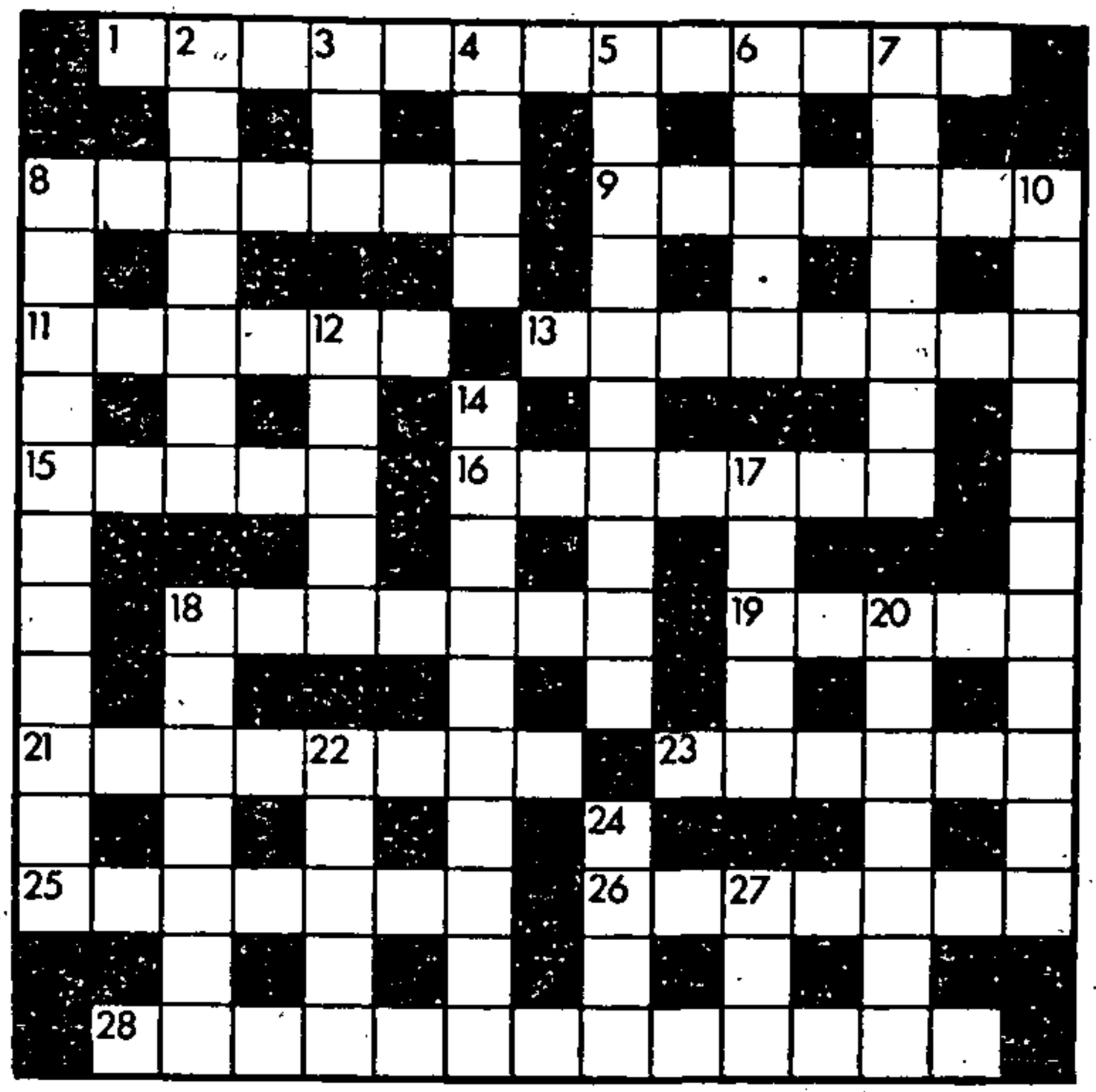

ACROSS

1 Gas Board, for instance (5, 8).

8 Poise of the cashier (7).

9 Nagged by the cold? (7).

11 "An injury is much sooner forgotten than an ——" (Lord Chesterfield) (6).

13 Dance of the fungi? (8).

15 Goat, perhaps (5).

16 Era of steam? No, it's electricity! (7).

18 Sage knew his onions! (7).

19 Plutocrat with only a shilling to his name (5).

21 Choose Richard, he's mercurial (8).

23 Beastly end! (6).

25 Reviling the fence (7).

26 Sh! Uncle is upset. He eats at midday (7).

28 Half a minute Enough for fifteen bouts? (6, 7).

DOWN

2 Jill amused? But without jam she's badly treated (3-4).

3 This party—strictly for the birds (3).

4 Mountain butter! (4).

5 GI dusts gin—revolting! (10).

6 Jeering at table? (5).

7 Artist gets a mixed diet to make him shine (7).

8 Set in motion by zoo keeper, probably (5, 2, 4).

10 American debts? No, the wherewithal to pay them (6, 5).

12 Alloy becomes true as steel (5).

14 Things shouldn't go this during the Boat Race (10).

17 In take over, Anne gets indefinite amount (5).

18 It's—well—rather like a turnip, Scandinavian style (7).

20 Stranded—each in bed (7).

22 Tester is rank, right inside (5).

24 I leave Liége confused with joy (4).

27 New one is all at sea (3).

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